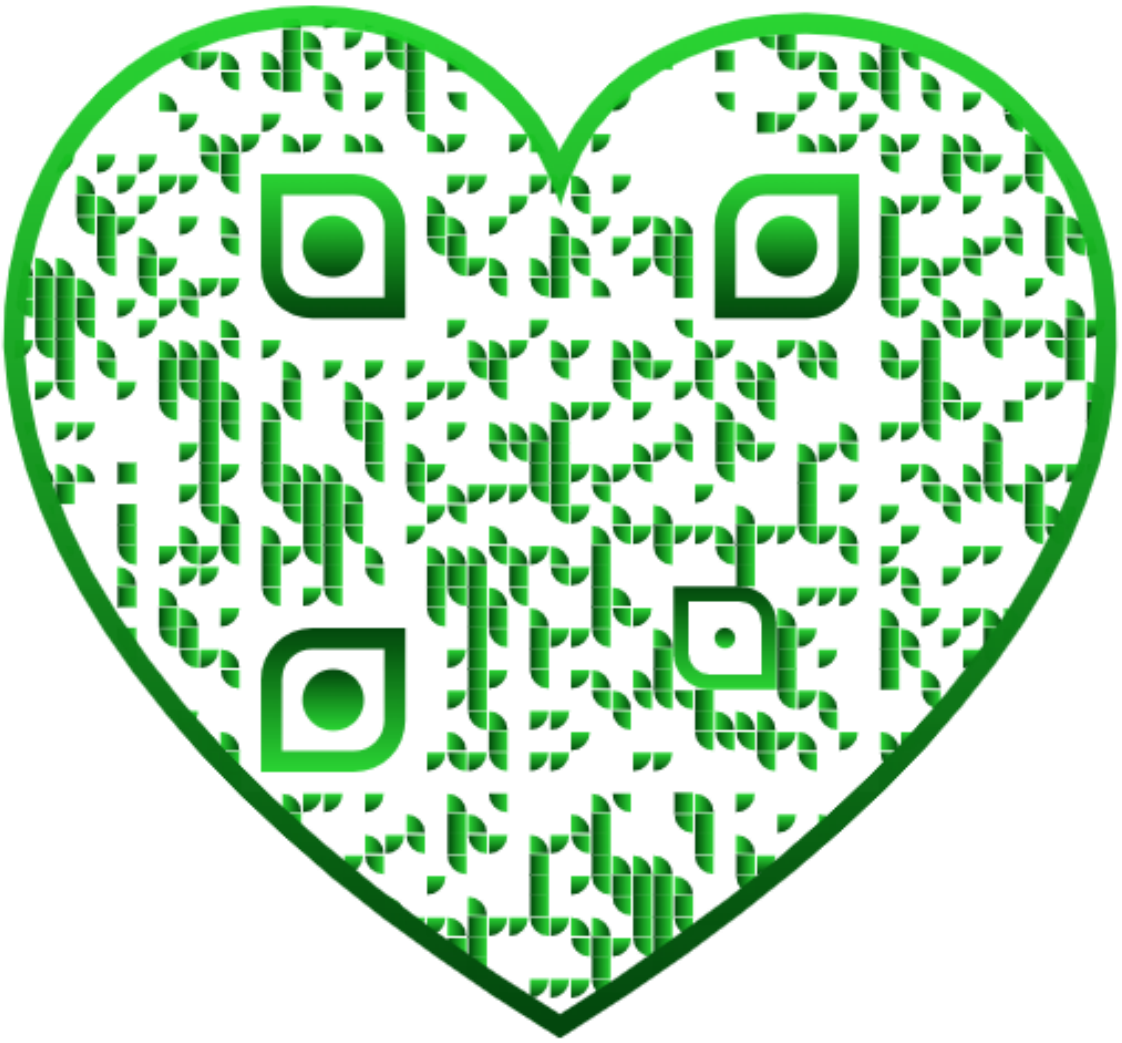
Jordan B Peterson 12 Rules for Life (2)



THE #1 BESTSELLER

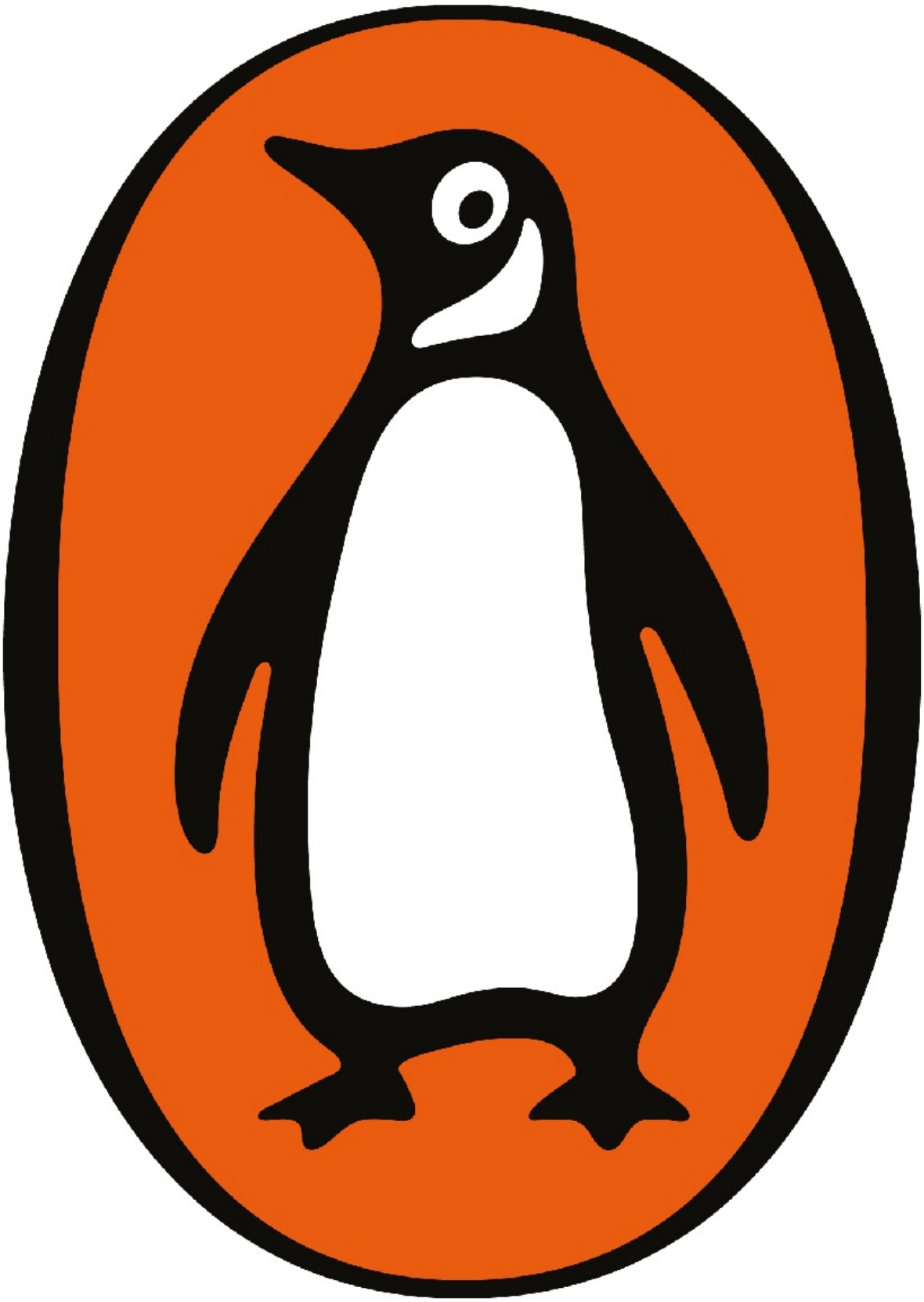
JORDAN B. PETERSON

12 RULES FOR LIFE

AN ANTIDOTE TO CHAOS

"One of the most important thinkers to emerge on the world stage for many years." THE SPECTATOR

FOREWORD BY NORMAN DOIDGE



2

Jordan B. Peterson

1 2 R U L E S F O R L I F E

An Antidote for Chaos

Foreword by Norman Doidge

Illustrations by Ethan Van Scriver

3

Table of Contents

Foreword by Norman Doidge

Overture

RULE 1 / Stand up straight with your shoulders back

RULE 2 / Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping

RULE 3 / Make friends with people who want the best for you

RULE 4 / Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today

RULE 5 / Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them

RULE 6 / Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world

RULE 7 / Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)

RULE 8 / Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie

RULE 9 / Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't

RULE 10 / Be precise in your speech

RULE 11 / Do not bother children when they are skateboarding

RULE 12 / Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street

Coda

Endnotes

Acknowledgements

Follow Penguin

Foreword

Rules? More rules? Really? Isn't life complicated enough, restricting enough, without

abstract rules that don't take our unique, individual situations into account? And given

that our brains are plastic, and all develop differently based on our life experiences, why

even expect that a few rules might be helpful to us all?

People don't clamour for rules, even in the Bible … as when Moses comes down the

mountain, after a long absence, bearing the tablets inscribed with ten commandments,

and finds the Children of Israel in revelry. They'd been Pharaoh's slaves and subject to his

tyrannical regulations for four hundred years, and after that Moses subjected them to the

harsh desert wilderness for another forty years, to purify them of their slavishness. Now,

free at last, they are unbridled, and have lost all control as they dance wildly around an

idol, a golden calf, displaying all manner of corporeal corruption.

"I've got some good news … and I've got some bad news," the lawgiver yells to them.

"Which do you want first?"

"The good news!" the hedonists reply.

"I got Him from fifteen commandments down to ten!"

"Hallelujah!" cries the unruly crowd. "And the bad?"

"Adultery is still in."

So rules there will be—but, please, not too many. We are ambivalent about rules, even

when we know they are good for us. If we are spirited souls, if we have character, rules

seem restrictive, an affront to our sense of agency and our pride in working out our own

lives. Why should we be judged according to another's rule?

And judged we are. After all, God didn't give Moses "The Ten Suggestions," he gave

Commandments; and if I'm a free agent, my first reaction to a command might just be

that nobody, not even God, tells me what to do, even if it's good for me. But the story of

the golden calf also reminds us that without rules we quickly become slaves to our

passions—and there's nothing freeing about that.

And the story suggests something more: unchaperoned, and left to our own untutored

judgment, we are quick to aim low and worship qualities that are beneath us —in this

case, an artificial animal that brings out our own animal instincts in a completely

unregulated way. The old Hebrew story makes it clear how the ancients felt about our

prospects for civilized behaviour in the absence of rules that seek to elevate our gaze and

raise our standards.

One neat thing about the Bible story is that it doesn't simply list its rules, as lawyers or

legislators or administrators might; it embeds them in a dramatic tale that illustrates why

we need them, thereby making them easier to understand. Similarly, in this book

Professor Peterson doesn't just propose his twelve rules, he tells stories, too, bringing to

bear his knowledge of many fields as he illustrates and explains why the best rules do not

ultimately restrict us but instead facilitate our goals and make for fuller, freer lives.

The first time I met Jordan Peterson was on September 12, 2004, at the home of two

mutual friends, TV producer Wodek Szemberg and medical internist Estera Bekier. It was

Wodek's birthday party. Wodek and Estera are Polish émigrés who grew up within the

Soviet empire, where it was understood that many topics were off limits, and that casually

questioning certain social arrangements and philosophical ideas (not to mention the

regime itself) could mean big trouble.

But now, host and hostess luxuriated in easygoing, honest talk, by having elegant

parties devoted to the pleasure of saying what you *really* thought and hearing others do

the same, in an uninhibited give-and-take. Here, the rule was "Speak your mind." If the

conversation turned to politics, people of different political persuasions spoke to each

other—indeed, looked forward to it—in a manner that is increasingly rare. Sometimes

Wodek's own opinions, or truths, exploded out of him, as did his laugh. Then he'd hug

whoever had made him laugh or provoked him to speak his mind with greater intensity

than even he might have intended. This was the best part of the parties, and this

frankness, and his warm embraces, made it worth provoking him. Meanwhile, Estera's

voice lilted across the room on a very precise path towards its intended listener. Truth

explosions didn't make the atmosphere any less easygoing for the company —they made

for more truth explosions!—liberating us, and more laughs, and making the whole

evening more pleasant, because with de-repressing Eastern Europeans like the Szemberg-

Bekiers, you always knew with what and with whom you were dealing, and that frankness

was enlivening. Honoré de Balzac, the novelist, once described the balls and parties in his

native France, observing that what appeared to be a single party was always really two. In

the first hours, the gathering was suffused with bored people posing and posturing, and

attendees who came to meet perhaps one special person who would confirm them in their

beauty and status. Then, only in the very late hours, after most of the guests had left,

would the second party, the real party, begin. Here the conversation was shared by each

person present, and open-hearted laughter replaced the starchy airs. At Estera and

Wodek's parties, this kind of wee-hours-of-the-morning disclosure and intimacy often

began as soon as we entered the room.

Wodek is a silver-haired, lion-maned hunter, always on the lookout for potential public

intellectuals, who knows how to spot people who can *really* talk in front of a TV camera

and who look authentic because they are (the camera picks up on that). He often invites

such people to these salons. That day Wodek brought a psychology professor, from my

own University of Toronto, who fit the bill: intellect and emotion in tandem. Wodek was

the first to put Jordan Peterson in front of a camera, and thought of him as a teacher in

search of students—because he was always ready to explain. And it helped that he liked

the camera and that the camera liked him back.

That afternoon there was a large table set outside in the Szemberg-Bekiers' garden;

around it was gathered the usual collection of lips and ears, and loquacious virtuosos. We

seemed, however, to be plagued by a buzzing paparazzi of bees, and here was this new

fellow at the table, with an Albertan accent, in cowboy boots, who was ignoring them,

and kept on talking. He kept talking while the rest of us were playing musical chairs to

keep away from the pests, yet also trying to remain at the table because this new addition

to our gatherings was so interesting.

He had this odd habit of speaking about the deepest questions to whoever was at this

table—most of them new acquaintances—as though he were just making small talk. Or, if

he did do small talk, the interval between "How do you know Wodek and Estera?" or "I

was a beekeeper once, so I'm used to them" and more serious topics would be

nanoseconds.

One might hear such questions discussed at parties where professors and professionals

gather, but usually the conversation would remain between two specialists in the topic,

off in a corner, or if shared with the whole group it was often not without someone

preening. But this Peterson, though erudite, didn't come across as a pedant. He had the

enthusiasm of a kid who had just learned something new and had to share it. He seemed

to be assuming, as a child would—before learning how dulled adults can become—that if

he thought something was interesting, then so might others. There was something boyish

in the cowboy, in his broaching of subjects as though we had all grown up together in the

same small town, or family, and had all been thinking about the very same problems of

human existence all along.

Peterson wasn't really an "eccentric"; he had sufficient conventional chops, had been a

Harvard professor, was a gentleman (as cowboys can be) though he did say *damn* and

bloody a lot, in a rural 1950s sort of way. But everyone listened, with fascination on their

faces, because he was in fact addressing questions of concern to everyone at the table.

There was something freeing about being with a person so learned yet speaking in such

an unedited way. His thinking was motoric; it seemed he needed to think *aloud*, to use his

motor cortex to think, but that motor also had to run fast to work properly. To get to

liftoff. Not quite manic, but his idling speed revved high. Spirited thoughts were tumbling

out. But unlike many academics who take the floor and hold it, if someone challenged or

corrected him he really seemed to *like* it. He didn't rear up and neigh. He'd say, in a kind

of folksy way, "Yeah," and bow his head involuntarily, wag it if he had overlooked

something, laughing at himself for overgeneralizing. He appreciated being shown another

side of an issue, and it became clear that thinking through a problem was, for him, a

dialogic process.

One could not but be struck by another unusual thing about him: for an egghead

Peterson was extremely practical. His examples were filled with applications to everyday

life: business management, how to make furniture (he made much of his own), designing

a simple house, making a room beautiful (now an internet meme) or in another, specific

case related to education, creating an online writing project that kept minority students

from dropping out of school by getting them to do a kind of psychoanalytic exercise on

themselves, in which they would free-associate about their past, present and future (now

known as the Self-Authoring Program).

I was always especially fond of mid-Western, Prairie types who come from a farm

(where they learned all about nature), or from a very small town, and who have worked

with their hands to make things, spent long periods outside in the harsh elements, and

are often self-educated and go to university against the odds. I found them quite unlike

their sophisticated but somewhat denatured urban counterparts, for whom higher

education was pre-ordained, and for that reason sometimes taken for granted, or thought

of not as an end in itself but simply as a life stage in the service of career advancement.

These Westerners were different: self-made, unentitled, hands on, neighbourly and less

precious than many of their big-city peers, who increasingly spend their lives indoors,

manipulating symbols on computers. This cowboy psychologist seemed to care about a

thought only if it might, in some way, be helpful to someone.

We became friends. As a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who loves literature, I was drawn

to him because here was a clinician who also had given himself a great books education,

and who not only loved soulful Russian novels, philosophy and ancient mythology, but

who also seemed to treat them as his most treasured inheritance. But he also did

illuminating statistical research on personality and temperament, and had studied

neuroscience. Though trained as a behaviourist, he was powerfully drawn to

psychoanalysis with its focus on dreams, archetypes, the persistence of childhood

conflicts in the adult, and the role of defences and rationalization in everyday life. He was

also an outlier in being the only member of the research-oriented Department of

Psychology at the University of Toronto who also kept a clinical practice.

On my visits, our conversations began with banter and laughter—that was the small-

town Peterson from the Alberta hinterland—his teenage years right out of the movie

7

FUBAR—welcoming you into his home. The house had been gutted by Tammy, his wife,

and himself, and turned into perhaps the most fascinating and shocking middle-class

home I had seen. They had art, some carved masks, and abstract portraits, but they were

overwhelmed by a huge collection of original Socialist Realist paintings of Lenin and the

early Communists commissioned by the USSR. Not long after the Soviet Union fell, and

most of the world breathed a sigh of relief, Peterson began purchasing this propaganda for

a song online. Paintings lionizing the Soviet revolutionary spirit completely filled every

single wall, the ceilings, even the bathrooms. The paintings were not there because Jordan

had any totalitarian sympathies, but because he wanted to remind himself of something

he knew he and everyone would rather forget: that hundreds of millions were murdered

in the name of utopia.

It took getting used to, this semi-haunted house “decorated” by a delusion that had

practically destroyed mankind. But it was eased by his wonderful and unique spouse,

Tammy, who was all in, who embraced and encouraged this unusual need for expression!

These paintings provided a visitor with the first window onto the full extent of Jordan’s

concern about our human capacity for evil in the name of good, and the psychological

mystery of self-deception (how can a person deceive himself and get away with it?)—an

interest we share. And then there were also the hours we’d spend discussing what I might

call a lesser problem (lesser because rarer), the human capacity for evil for the sake of

evil, the joy some people take in destroying others, captured famously by the seventeenth-

century English poet John Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

And so we’d chat and have our tea in his kitchen-underworld, walled by this odd art

collection, a visual marker of his earnest quest to move beyond simplistic ideology, left or

right, and not repeat mistakes of the past. After a while, there was nothing peculiar about

taking tea in the kitchen, discussing family issues, one's latest reading, with those

ominous pictures hovering. It was just living in the world as it was, or in some places, is.

In Jordan's first and only book before this one, *Maps of Meaning*, he shares his profound

insights into universal themes of world mythology, and explains how all cultures have

created stories to help us grapple with, and ultimately map, the chaos into which we are

thrown at birth; this chaos is everything that is unknown to us, and any unexplored

territory that we must traverse, be it in the world outside or the psyche within.

Combining evolution, the neuroscience of emotion, some of the best of Jung, some of

Freud, much of the great works of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Eliade,

Neumann, Piaget, Frye and Frankl, *Maps of Meaning*, published nearly two decades ago,

shows Jordan's wide-ranging approach to understanding how human beings and the

human brain deal with the archetypal situation that arises whenever we, in our daily lives,

must face something we do not understand. The brilliance of the book is in his

demonstration of how rooted this situation is in evolution, our DNA, our brains and our

most ancient stories. And he shows that these stories have survived because they still

provide guidance in dealing with uncertainty, and the unavoidable unknown.

One of the many virtues of the book you are reading now is that it provides an entry

point into *Maps of Meaning,* which is a highly complex work because Jordan was working

out his approach to psychology as he wrote it. But it was foundational, because no matter

how different our genes or life experiences may be, or how differently our plastic brains

are wired by our experience, we all have to deal with the unknown, and we all attempt to

move from chaos to order. And this is why many of the rules in this book, being based on

Maps of Meaning, have an element of universality to them.

Maps of Meaning was sparked by Jordan's agonized awareness, as a teenager growing up in

the midst of the Cold War, that much of mankind seemed on the verge of blowing up the

planet to defend their various identities. He felt he had to understand how it could be that

people would sacrifice everything for an “identity,” whatever that was. And he felt he had

to understand the ideologies that drove totalitarian regimes to a variant of that same

behaviour: killing their own citizens. In *Maps of Meaning*, and again in this book, one of

the matters he cautions readers to be most wary of is ideology, no matter who is peddling

it or to what end.

Ideologies are simple ideas, disguised as science or philosophy, that purport to explain

the complexity of the world and offer remedies that will perfect it. Ideologues are people

who pretend they know how to “make the world a better place” before they’ve taken care

of their own chaos within. (The warrior identity that their ideology gives them covers

over that chaos.) That’s hubris, of course, and one of the most important themes of this

book, is “set your house in order” first, and Jordan provides practical advice on how to do

this.

Ideologies are substitutes for true knowledge, and ideologues are always dangerous

when they come to power, because a simple-minded I-know-it-all approach is no match

for the complexity of existence. Furthermore, when their social contraptions fail to fly,

ideologues blame not themselves but all who see through the simplifications. Another

great U of T professor, Lewis Feuer, in his book *Ideology and the Ideologists*, observed that

ideologies retool the very religious stories they purport to have supplanted, but eliminate

the narrative and psychological richness. Communism borrowed from the story of the

Children of Israel in Egypt, with an enslaved class, rich persecutors, a leader, like Lenin,

who goes abroad, lives among the enslavers, and then leads the enslaved to the promised

land (the utopia; the dictatorship of the proletariat).

To understand ideology, Jordan read extensively about not only the Soviet gulag, but

also the Holocaust and the rise of Nazism. I had never before met a person, born

Christian and of my generation, who was so utterly tormented by what happened in

Europe to the Jews, and who had worked so hard to understand how it could have

occurred. I too had studied this in depth. My own father survived Auschwitz. My

grandmother was middle-aged when she stood face to face with Dr. Josef Mengele, the

Nazi physician who conducted unspeakably cruel experiments on his victims, and she

survived Auschwitz by disobeying his order to join the line with the elderly, the grey and

the weak, and instead slipping into a line with younger people. She avoided the gas

chambers a second time by trading food for hair dye so she wouldn't be murdered for

looking too old. My grandfather, her husband, survived the Mauthausen concentration

camp, but choked to death on the first piece of solid food he was given, just before

liberation day. I relate this, because years after we became friends, when Jordan would

take a classical liberal stand for free speech, he would be accused by left-wing extremists

as being a right-wing bigot.

Let me say, with all the moderation I can summon: *at best*, those accusers have simply

not done their due diligence. I have; with a family history such as mine, one develops not

only radar, but underwater sonar for right-wing bigotry; but even more important, one

learns to recognize the kind of person with the comprehension, tools, good will and

courage to combat it, and Jordan Peterson is *that* person.

My own dissatisfaction with modern political science's attempts to understand the rise

of Nazism, totalitarianism and prejudice was a major factor in my decision to supplement

my studies of political science with the study of the unconscious, projection,

psychoanalysis, the regressive potential of group psychology, psychiatry and the brain.

Jordan switched out of political science for similar reasons. With these important parallel

interests, we didn't always agree on "the answers" (thank God), but we almost always

agreed on the questions.

Our friendship wasn't all doom and gloom. I have made a habit of attending my fellow

professors' classes at our university, and so attended his, which were always packed, and I

saw what now millions have seen online: a brilliant, often dazzling public speaker who

was at his best riffing like a jazz artist; at times he resembled an ardent Prairie preacher

(not in evangelizing, but in his passion, in his ability to tell stories that convey the life-

stakes that go with believing or disbelieving various ideas). Then he'd just as easily switch

to do a breathtakingly systematic summary of a series of scientific studies. He was a

master at helping students become more reflective, and take themselves and their futures

seriously. He taught them to respect many of the greatest books ever written. He gave

vivid examples from clinical practice, was (appropriately) self-revealing, even of his own

vulnerabilities, and made fascinating links between evolution, the brain and religious

stories. In a world where students are taught to see evolution and religion as simply

opposed (by thinkers like Richard Dawkins), Jordan showed his students how evolution,

of all things, helps to explain the profound psychological appeal and wisdom of many

ancient stories, from Gilgamesh to the life of the Buddha, Egyptian mythology and the

Bible. He showed, for instance, how stories about journeying voluntarily into the

unknown—the hero's quest—mirror universal tasks for which the brain evolved. He

respected the stories, was not reductionist, and never claimed to exhaust their wisdom. If

he discussed a topic such as prejudice, or its emotional relatives fear and disgust, or the

differences between the sexes on average, he was able to show how these traits evolved

and why they survived.

Above all, he alerted his students to topics rarely discussed in university, such as the

simple fact that all the ancients, from Buddha to the biblical authors, knew what every

slightly worn-out adult knows, that life is suffering. If you are suffering, or someone close

to you is, that's sad. But alas, it's not particularly special. We don't suffer only because

"politicians are dimwitted," or "the system is corrupt," or because you and I, like almost

everyone else, can *legitimately* describe ourselves, in some way, as a victim of something or

someone. It is because we are born human that we are guaranteed a good dose of

suffering. And chances are, if you or someone you love is not suffering now, they will be

within five years, unless you are freakishly lucky. Rearing kids is hard, work is hard,

aging, sickness and death are hard, and Jordan emphasized that doing all that totally on

your own, without the benefit of a loving relationship, or wisdom, or the psychological

insights of the greatest psychologists, only makes it harder. He wasn't scaring the

students; in fact, they found this frank talk reassuring, because in the depths of their

psyches, most of them knew what he said was true, even if there was never a forum to

discuss it—perhaps because the adults in their lives had become so naively overprotective

that they deluded themselves into thinking that not talking about suffering would in

some way magically protect their children from it.

Here he would relate the myth of the hero, a cross-cultural theme explored

psychoanalytically by Otto Rank, who noted, following Freud, that hero myths are similar

in many cultures, a theme that was picked up by Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Erich

Neumann, among others. Where Freud made great contributions in explaining neuroses

by, among other things, focusing on understanding what we might call a failed-hero story

(that of Oedipus), Jordan focused on triumphant heroes. In all these triumph stories, the

hero has to go into the unknown, into an unexplored territory, and deal with a new great

challenge and take great risks. In the process, something of himself has to die, or be given

up, so he can be reborn and meet the challenge. This requires courage, something rarely

discussed in a psychology class or textbook. During his recent public stand for free speech

and against what I call “forced speech” (because it involves a government forcing citizens

to voice political views), the stakes were very high; he had much to lose, and knew it.

Nonetheless, I saw him (and Tammy, for that matter) not only display such courage, but

also continue to live by many of the rules in this book, some of which can be very

demanding.

I saw him grow, from the remarkable person he was, into someone even more able and

assured—through living by these rules. In fact, it was the process of writing this book,

and developing these rules, that led him to take the stand he did against forced or

compelled speech. And that is why, during those events, he started posting some of his

thoughts about life and these rules on the internet. Now, over 100 million YouTube hits

later, we know they have struck a chord.

Given our distaste for rules, how do we explain the extraordinary response to his lectures,

which give rules? In Jordan's case, it was of course his charisma and a rare willingness to

stand for a principle that got him a wide hearing online initially; views of his first

YouTube statements quickly numbered in the hundreds of thousands. But people have

kept listening because what he is saying meets a deep and unarticulated need. And that is

because alongside our wish to be free of rules, we all search for structure.

The hunger among many younger people for rules, or at least guidelines, is greater

today for good reason. In the West at least, millennials are living through a unique

historical situation. They are, I believe, the first generation to have been so thoroughly

taught two seemingly contradictory ideas about morality, simultaneously—at their

schools, colleges and universities, by many in my own generation. This contradiction has

left them at times disoriented and uncertain, without guidance and, more tragically,

deprived of riches they don't even know exist.

The first idea or teaching is that morality is relative, at best a personal "value

judgment." *Relative* means that there is no absolute right or wrong in anything; instead,

morality and the rules associated with it are just a matter of personal opinion or

happenstance, "relative to" or "related to" a particular framework, such as one's ethnicity,

one's upbringing, or the culture or historical moment one is born into. It's nothing but an

accident of birth. According to this argument (now a creed), history teaches that

religions, tribes, nations and ethnic groups tend to disagree about fundamental matters,

and always have. Today, the postmodernist left makes the additional claim that one

group's morality is *nothing but* its attempt to exercise power over another group. So, the

decent thing to do—once it becomes apparent how arbitrary your, and your society's,

"moral values" are—is to show tolerance for people who think differently, and who come

from different (diverse) backgrounds. That emphasis on tolerance is so paramount that

for many people one of the worst character flaws a person can have is to be

“judgmental. ” **fn1** And, since we don’t know right from wrong, or what is good, just about

the most inappropriate thing an adult can do is give a young person advice about how to live.

And so a generation has been raised untutored in what was once called, aptly, “practical

wisdom,” which guided previous generations. Millennials, often told they have received

the finest education available anywhere, have actually suffered a form of serious

intellectual and moral neglect. The relativists of my generation and Jordan’s, many of

whom became their professors, chose to devalue thousands of years of human knowledge

about how to acquire virtue, dismissing it as passé, “not relevant” or even “oppressive.”

They were so successful at it that the very word “virtue” sounds out of date, and someone

using it appears anachronistically moralistic and self-righteous.

The study of virtue is not quite the same as the study of morals (right and wrong, good

and evil). Aristotle defined the virtues simply as the ways of behaving that are most

conducive to happiness in life. Vice was defined as the ways of behaving least conducive

to happiness. He observed that the virtues always aim for balance and avoid the extremes

of the vices. Aristotle studied the virtues and the vices in his *Nicomachean Ethics.* It was a

book based on experience and observation, not conjecture, about the kind of happiness

that was possible for human beings. Cultivating *judgment* about the difference between

virtue and vice is the beginning of wisdom, something that can never be out of date.

11

By contrast, our modern relativism begins by asserting that making judgments about

how to live is impossible, because there is no *real* good, and no *true* virtue (as these too

are relative). Thus relativism's closest approximation to "virtue" is "tolerance." Only

tolerance will provide social cohesion between different groups, and save us from harming

each other. On Facebook and other forms of social media, therefore, you signal your so-

called virtue, telling everyone how tolerant, open and compassionate you are, and wait for

likes to accumulate. (Leave aside that telling people you're virtuous isn't a virtue, it's self-

promotion. Virtue signalling is not virtue. Virtue signalling is, quite possibly, our

commonest vice.)

Intolerance of others' views (no matter how ignorant or incoherent they may be) is not

simply wrong; in a world where there is no right or wrong, it is worse: it is a sign you are

embarrassingly unsophisticated or, possibly, dangerous.

But it turns out that many people cannot tolerate the vacuum—the chaos—which is

inherent in life, but made worse by this moral relativism; they cannot live without a moral

compass, without an ideal at which to aim in their lives. (For relativists, ideals are values

too, and like all values, they are merely "relative" and hardly worth sacrificing for.) So,

right alongside relativism, we find the spread of nihilism and despair, and also the

opposite of moral relativism: the blind certainty offered by ideologies that claim to have

an answer for everything.

And so we arrive at the second teaching that millennials have been bombarded with.

They sign up for a humanities course, to study greatest books ever written. But they're

not assigned the books; instead they are given ideological attacks on them, based on some

appalling simplification. Where the relativist is filled with uncertainty, the ideologue is

the very opposite. He or she is hyper-judgmental and censorious, always knows what's

wrong about others, and what to do about it. Sometimes it seems the only people willing

to give advice in a relativistic society are those with the least to offer.

Modern moral relativism has many sources. As we in the West learned more history, we

understood that different epochs had different moral codes. As we travelled the seas and

explored the globe, we learned of far-flung tribes on different continents whose different

moral codes made sense relative to, or within the framework of, their societies. Science

played a role, too, by attacking the religious view of the world, and thus undermining the

religious grounds for ethics and rules. Materialist social science implied that we could

divide the world into facts (which all could observe, and were objective and "real") and

values (which were subjective and personal). Then we could first agree on the facts, and,

maybe, one day, develop a scientific code of ethics (which has yet to arrive). Moreover, by

implying that values had a lesser reality than facts, science contributed in yet another way

to moral relativism, for it treated “value” as secondary. (But the idea that we can easily

separate facts and values was and remains naive; to some extent, one’s values determine

what one will pay attention to, and what will count as a fact.)

The idea that different societies had different rules and morals was known to the

ancient world too, and it is interesting to compare its response to this realization with the

modern response (relativism, nihilism and ideology). When the ancient Greeks sailed to

India and elsewhere, they too discovered that rules, morals and customs differed from

place to place, and saw that the explanation for what was right and wrong was often

rooted in some ancestral authority. The Greek response was not despair, but a new

invention: philosophy.

Socrates, reacting to the uncertainty bred by awareness of these conflicting moral

codes, decided that instead of becoming a nihilist, a relativist or an ideologue, he would

devote his life to the search for wisdom that could reason about these differences, i.e., he

helped invent philosophy. He spent his life asking perplexing, foundational questions,

such as “What is virtue?” and “How can one live the good life?” and “What is justice?”

and he looked at different approaches, asking which seemed most coherent and most in

accord with human nature. These are the kinds of questions that I believe animate this

book.

For the ancients, the discovery that different people have different ideas about how,

practically, to live, did not paralyze them; it deepened their understanding of humanity

and led to some of the most satisfying conversations human beings have ever had, about

how life might be lived.

Likewise, Aristotle. Instead of despairing about these differences in moral codes,

Aristotle argued that though specific rules, laws and customs differed from place to place,

what does not differ is that in all places human beings, by their nature, have a proclivity

to make rules, laws and customs. To put this in modern terms, it seems that all human

beings are, by some kind of biological endowment, so ineradicably concerned with

morality that we create a structure of laws and rules wherever we are. The idea that

human life can be free of moral concerns is a fantasy.

We are rule generators. And given that we are moral animals, what must be the effect

of our simplistic modern relativism upon us? It means we are hobbling ourselves by

pretending to be something we are not. It is a mask, but a strange one, for it mostly

deceives the one who wears it. *Sccccratccch* the most clever postmodern-relativist

professor's Mercedes with a key, and you will see how fast the mask of relativism (with

its pretense that there can be neither right nor wrong) and the cloak of radical tolerance

come off.

Because we do not yet have an ethics based on modern science, Jordan is not trying to

develop his rules by wiping the slate clean—by dismissing thousands of years of wisdom

as mere superstition and ignoring our greatest moral achievements. Far better to integrate

the best of what we are now learning with the books human beings saw fit to preserve

over millennia, and with the stories that have survived, against all odds, time's tendency

to obliterate.

He is doing what reasonable guides have always done: he makes no claim that human

wisdom begins with himself, but, rather, turns first to his own guides. And although the

topics in this book are serious, Jordan often has great fun addressing them with a light

touch, as the chapter headings convey. He makes no claim to be exhaustive, and

sometimes the chapters consist of wide-ranging discussions of our psychology as he

understands it.

So why not call this a book of "guidelines," a far more relaxed, user-friendly and less

rigid sounding term than "rules"?

Because these really are rules. And the foremost rule is that you must take

responsibility for your own life. Period.

One might think that a generation that has heard endlessly, from their more ideological

teachers, about the rights, rights, rights that belong to them, would object to being told

that they would do better to focus instead on taking responsibility. Yet this generation,

many of whom were raised in small families by hyper-protective parents, on soft-surface

playgrounds, and then taught in universities with “safe spaces” where they don’t have to

hear things they don’t want to—schooled to be risk-averse—has among it, now, millions

who feel stultified by this underestimation of their potential resilience and who have

embraced Jordan’s message that each individual has ultimate responsibility to bear; that if

one wants to live a full life, one first sets one’s own house in order; and only then can one

sensibly aim to take on bigger responsibilities. The extent of this reaction has often

moved both of us to the brink of tears.

Sometimes these rules are demanding. They require you to undertake an incremental

process that over time will stretch you to a new limit. That requires, as I’ve said,

venturing into the unknown. Stretching yourself beyond the boundaries of your current

self requires carefully choosing and then pursuing ideals: ideals that are up there, above

you, superior to you—and that you can't always be sure you will reach.

But if it's uncertain that our ideals are attainable, why do we bother reaching in the

first place? Because if you don't reach for them, it is certain you will never feel that your

life has meaning.

And perhaps because, as unfamiliar and strange as it sounds, in the deepest part of our

psyche, we all want to be judged.

Dr. Norman Doidge, MD, is the author

of *The Brain That Changes Itself*

Overture

This book has a short history and a long history. We'll begin with the short history.

In 2012, I started contributing to a website called Quora. On Quora, anyone can ask a

question, of any sort—and anyone can answer. Readers upvote those answers they like,

and downvote those they don't. In this manner, the most useful answers rise to the top,

while the others sink into oblivion. I was curious about the site. I liked its free-for-all

nature. The discussion was often compelling, and it was interesting to see the diverse

range of opinions generated by the same question.

When I was taking a break (or avoiding work), I often turned to Quora, looking for

questions to engage with. I considered, and eventually answered, such questions as

“What’s the difference between being happy and being content?”, “What things get better

as you age?” and “What makes life more meaningful?”

Quora tells you how many people have viewed your answer and how many upvotes you

received. Thus, you can determine your reach, and see what people think of your ideas.

Only a small minority of those who view an answer upvote it. As of July 2017, as I write

this—and five years after I addressed “What makes life more meaningful?”—my answer

to that question has received a relatively small audience (14,000 views, and 133 upvotes),

while my response to the question about aging has been viewed by 7,200 people and

received 36 upvotes. Not exactly home runs. However, it’s to be expected. On such sites,

most answers receive very little attention, while a tiny minority become

disproportionately popular.

Soon after, I answered another question: “What are the most valuable things everyone

should know?” I wrote a list of rules, or maxims; some dead serious, some tongue-in-

cheek—“Be grateful in spite of your suffering,” “Do not do things that you hate,” “Do not

hide things in the fog,” and so on. The Quora readers appeared pleased with this list.

They commented on and shared it. They said such things as “I’m definitely printing this

list out and keeping it as a reference. Simply phenomenal,” and “You win Quora. We can

just close the site now.” Students at the University of Toronto, where I teach, came up to

me and told me how much they liked it. To date, my answer to “What are the most

valuable things …” has been viewed by a hundred and twenty thousand people and been

upvoted twenty-three hundred times. Only a few hundred of the roughly six hundred

thousand questions on Quora have cracked the two-thousand-upvote barrier. My

procrastination-induced musings hit a nerve. I had written a 99.9 percentile answer.

It was not obvious to me when I wrote the list of rules for living that it was going to

perform so well. I had put a fair bit of care into all the sixty or so answers I submitted in

the few months surrounding that post. Nonetheless, Quora provides market research at

its finest. The respondents are anonymous. They're disinterested, in the best sense. Their

opinions are spontaneous and unbiased. So, I paid attention to the results, and thought

about the reasons for that answer's disproportionate success. Perhaps I struck the right

balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar while formulating the rules. Perhaps

people were drawn to the structure that such rules imply. Perhaps people just like lists.

A few months earlier, in March of 2012, I had received an email from a literary agent.

She had heard me speak on CBC radio during a show entitled *Just Say No to Happiness*,

where I had criticized the idea that happiness was the proper goal for life. Over the

previous decades I had read more than my share of dark books about the twentieth

century, focusing particularly on Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Aleksandr

Solzhenitsyn, the great documenter of the slave-labour-camp horrors of the latter, once

wrote that the “pitiful ideology” holding that “human beings are created for happiness”

was an ideology “done in by the first blow of the work assigner’s cudgel. ”1 In a crisis, the

inevitable suffering that life entails can rapidly make a mockery of the idea that happiness

is the proper pursuit of the individual. On the radio show, I suggested, instead, that a

deeper meaning was required. I noted that the nature of such meaning was constantly re-

presented in the great stories of the past, and that it had more to do with developing

character in the face of suffering than with happiness. This is part of the long history of

the present work.

From 1985 until 1999 I worked for about three hours a day on the only other book I

have ever published: *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. During that time, and in the

years since, I also taught a course on the material in that book, first at Harvard, and now

at the University of Toronto. In 2013, observing the rise of YouTube, and because of the

popularity of some work I had done with TVO, a Canadian public TV station, I decided to

film my university and public lectures and place them online. They attracted an

increasingly large audience—more than a million views by April 2016. The number of

views has risen very dramatically since then (up to eighteen million as I write this), but

that is in part because I became embroiled in a political controversy that drew an

inordinate amount of attention.

That's another story. Maybe even another book.

I proposed in *Maps of Meaning* that the great myths and religious stories of the past,

particularly those derived from an earlier, oral tradition, were *moral* in their intent, rather

than descriptive. Thus, they did not concern themselves with what the world was, as a

scientist might have it, but with how a human being should act. I suggested that our

ancestors portrayed the world as a stage—a drama—instead of a place of objects. I

described how I had come to believe that the constituent elements of the world as drama

were order and chaos, and not material things.

Order is where the people around you act according to well-understood social norms,

and remain predictable and cooperative. It's the world of social structure, explored

territory, and familiarity. The state of Order is typically portrayed, symbolically—

imaginatively—as masculine. It's the Wise King and the Tyrant, forever bound together,

as society is simultaneously structure and oppression.

Chaos, by contrast, is where—or when—something unexpected happens. Chaos

emerges, in trivial form, when you tell a joke at a party with people you think you know

and a silent and embarrassing chill falls over the gathering. Chaos is what emerges more

catastrophically when you suddenly find yourself without employment, or are betrayed by

a lover. As the antithesis of symbolically masculine order, it's presented imaginatively as

feminine. It's the new and unpredictable suddenly emerging in the midst of the

commonplace familiar. It's Creation and Destruction, the source of new things and the

destination of the dead (as nature, as opposed to culture, is simultaneously birth and

demise).

Order and chaos are the yang and yin of the famous Taoist symbol: two serpents, head

to tail. **fn1** Order is the white, masculine serpent; Chaos, its black, feminine counterpart.

The black dot in the white—and the white in the black—indicate the possibility of

transformation: just when things seem secure, the unknown can loom, unexpectedly and

large. Conversely, just when everything seems lost, new order can emerge from

catastrophe and chaos.

For the Taoists, meaning is to be found on the border between the ever-entwined pair.

To walk that border is to stay on the path of life, the divine Way.

And that's much better than happiness.

The literary agent I referred to listened to the CBC radio broadcast where I discussed

such issues. It left her asking herself deeper questions. She emailed me, asking if I had

considered writing a book for a general audience. I had previously attempted to produce a

more accessible version of *Maps of Meaning*, which is a very dense book. But I found that

the spirit was neither in me during that attempt nor in the resultant manuscript. I think

this was because I was imitating my former self, and my previous book, instead of

occupying the place between order and chaos and producing something new. I suggested

that she watch four of the lectures I had done for a TVO program called *Big Ideas* on my

YouTube channel. I thought if she did that we could have a more informed and thorough

discussion about what kind of topics I might address in a more publicly accessible book.

She contacted me a few weeks later, after watching all four lectures and discussing

them with a colleague. Her interest had been further heightened, as had her commitment

to the project. That was promising—and unexpected. I'm always surprised when people

respond positively to what I am saying, given its seriousness and strange nature. I'm

amazed I have been allowed (even encouraged) to teach what I taught first in Boston and

now in Toronto. I've always thought that if people really noticed what I was teaching

there would be Hell to pay. You can decide for yourself what truth there might be in that

concern after reading this book. :)

She suggested that I write a guide of sorts to what a person needs “to live well”—

whatever that might mean. I thought immediately about my Quora list. I had in the

meantime written some further thoughts about of the rules I had posted. People had

responded positively toward those new ideas, as well. It seemed to me, therefore, that

there might be a nice fit between the Quora list and my new agent’s ideas. So, I sent her

the list. She liked it.

At about the same time, a friend and former student of mine—the novelist and

screenwriter Gregg Hurwitz—was considering a new book, which would become the

bestselling thriller *Orphan X*. He liked the rules, too. He had Mia, the book’s female lead,

post a selection of them, one by one, on her fridge, at points in the story where they

seemed apropos. That was another piece of evidence supporting my supposition of their

attractiveness. I suggested to my agent that I write a brief chapter on each of the rules.

She agreed, so I wrote a book proposal suggesting as much. When I started writing the

actual chapters, however, they weren't at all brief. I had much more to say about each rule

than I originally envisioned.

This was partly because I had spent a very long time researching my first book:

studying history, mythology, neuroscience, psychoanalysis, child psychology, poetry, and

large sections of the Bible. I read and perhaps even understood much of Milton's *Paradise*

Lost, Goethe's *Faust* and Dante's *Inferno*. I integrated all of that, for better or worse, trying

to address a perplexing problem: the reason or reasons for the nuclear standoff of the

Cold War. I couldn't understand how belief systems could be so important to people that

they were willing to risk the destruction of the world to protect them. I came to realize

that shared belief systems made people intelligible to one another—and that the systems

weren't just about belief.

People who live by the same code are rendered mutually predictable to one another.

They act in keeping with each other's expectations and desires. They can cooperate. They

can even compete peacefully, because everyone knows what to expect from everyone else.

A shared belief system, partly psychological, partly acted out, simplifies everyone—in

their own eyes, and in the eyes of others. Shared beliefs simplify the world, as well,

because people who know what to expect from one another can act together to tame the

world. There is perhaps nothing more important than the maintenance of this

organization—this simplification. If it's threatened, the great ship of state rocks.

17

It isn't precisely that people will fight for what they believe. They will fight, instead, to

maintain *the match between* what they believe, what they expect, and what they desire.

They will fight to maintain the match between what they expect and how everyone is

acting. It is precisely the maintenance of that match that enables everyone to live together

peacefully, predictably and productively. It reduces uncertainty and the chaotic mix of

intolerable emotions that uncertainty inevitably produces.

Imagine someone betrayed by a trusted lover. The sacred social contract obtaining

between the two has been violated. Actions speak louder than words, and an act of

betrayal disrupts the fragile and carefully negotiated peace of an intimate relationship. In

the aftermath of disloyalty, people are seized by terrible emotions: disgust, contempt (for

self and traitor), guilt, anxiety, rage and dread. Conflict is inevitable, sometimes with

deadly results. Shared belief systems—shared systems of agreed-upon conduct and

expectation—regulate and control all those powerful forces. It's no wonder that people

will fight to protect something that saves them from being possessed by emotions of

chaos and terror (and after that from degeneration into strife and combat).

There's more to it, too. A shared cultural system stabilizes human interaction, but is

also a system of value—a hierarchy of value, where some things are given priority and

importance and others are not. In the absence of such a system of value, people simply

cannot act. In fact, they can't even perceive, because both action and perception require a

goal, and a valid goal is, by necessity, something valued. We experience much of our

positive emotion in relation to goals. We are not happy, technically speaking, unless we

see ourselves progressing—and the very idea of progression implies value. Worse yet is

the fact that the meaning of life without positive value is not simply neutral. Because we

are vulnerable and mortal, pain and anxiety are an integral part of human existence. We

must have something to set against the suffering that is intrinsic to Being. **fn2** We must

have the meaning inherent in a profound system of value or the horror of existence

rapidly becomes paramount. Then, nihilism beckons, with its hopelessness and despair.

So: no value, no meaning. Between value systems, however, there is the possibility of

conflict. We are thus eternally caught between the most diamantine rock and the hardest

of places: loss of group-centred belief renders life chaotic, miserable, intolerable; presence

of group-centred belief makes conflict with other groups inevitable. In the West, we have

been withdrawing from our tradition-, religion- and even nation-centred cultures, partly

to decrease the danger of group conflict. But we are increasingly falling prey to the

desperation of meaninglessness, and that is no improvement at all.

While writing *Maps of Meaning*, I was (also) driven by the realization that we can no

longer afford conflict—certainly not on the scale of the world conflagrations of the

twentieth century. Our technologies of destruction have become too powerful. The

potential consequences of war are literally apocalyptic. But we cannot simply abandon our

systems of value, our beliefs, our cultures, either. I agonized over this apparently

intractable problem for months. Was there a third way, invisible to me? I dreamt one

night during this period that I was suspended in mid-air, clinging to a chandelier, many

stories above the ground, directly under the dome of a massive cathedral. The people on

the floor below were distant and tiny. There was a great expanse between me and any

wall—and even the peak of the dome itself.

I have learned to pay attention to dreams, not least because of my training as a clinical

psychologist. Dreams shed light on the dim places where reason itself has yet to voyage. I

have studied Christianity a fair bit, too (more than other religious traditions, although I

am always trying to redress this lack). Like others, therefore, I must and do draw more

from what I do know than from what I do not. I knew that cathedrals were constructed in

the shape of a cross, and that the point under the dome was the centre of the cross. I

knew that the cross was simultaneously, the point of greatest suffering, the point of death

and transformation, and the symbolic centre of the world. That was not somewhere I

wanted to be. I managed to get down, out of the heights—out of the symbolic sky—back

to safe, familiar, anonymous ground. I don’t know how. Then, still in my dream, I

returned to my bedroom and my bed and tried to return to sleep and the peace of

unconsciousness. As I relaxed, however, I could feel my body transported. A great wind

was dissolving me, preparing to propel me back to the cathedral, to place me once again

at that central point. There was no escape. It was a true nightmare. I forced myself awake.

The curtains behind me were blowing in over my pillows. Half asleep, I looked at the foot

of the bed. I saw the great cathedral doors. I shook myself completely awake and they

disappeared.

My dream placed me at the centre of Being itself, and there was no escape. It took me

months to understand what this meant. During this time, I came to a more complete,

personal realization of what the great stories of the past continually insist upon: the

centre is occupied by the individual. The centre is marked by the cross, as X marks the

spot. Existence at that cross is suffering and transformation—and that fact, above all,

needs to be voluntarily accepted. It is possible to transcend slavish adherence to the group

and its doctrines and, simultaneously, to avoid the pitfalls of its opposite extreme,

nihilism. It is possible, instead, to find sufficient meaning in individual consciousness and

experience.

How could the world be freed from the terrible dilemma of conflict, on the one hand,

and psychological and social dissolution, on the other? The answer was this: through the

elevation and development of the individual, and through the willingness of everyone to

shoulder the burden of Being and to take the heroic path. We must each adopt as much

responsibility as possible for individual life, society and the world. We must each tell the

truth and repair what is in disrepair and break down and recreate what is old and

outdated. It is in this manner that we can and must reduce the suffering that poisons the

world. It's asking a lot. It's asking for everything. But the alternative—the horror of

authoritarian belief, the chaos of the collapsed state, the tragic catastrophe of the

unbridled natural world, the existential angst and weakness of the purposeless individual

—is clearly worse.

I have been thinking and lecturing about such ideas for decades. I have built up a large

corpus of stories and concepts pertaining to them. I am not for a moment claiming,

however, that I am entirely correct or complete in my thinking. Being is far more

complicated than one person can know, and I don't have the whole story. I'm simply

offering the best I can manage.

In any case, the consequence of all that previous research and thinking was the new

essays which eventually became this book. My initial idea was to write a short essay on all

forty of the answers I had provided to Quora. That proposal was accepted by Penguin

Random House Canada. While writing, however, I cut the essay number to twenty-five

and then to sixteen and then finally, to the current twelve. I've been editing that

remainder, with the help and care of my official editor (and with the vicious and horribly

accurate criticism of Hurwitz, mentioned previously) for the past three years.

It took a long time to settle on a title: *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos.* Why did

that one rise up above all others? First and foremost, because of its simplicity. It indicates

clearly that people need ordering principles, and that chaos otherwise beckons. We

require rules, standards, values—alone and together. We're pack animals, beasts of

burden. We must bear a load, to justify our miserable existence. We require routine and

tradition. That's order. Order can become excessive, and that's not good, but chaos can

swamp us, so we drown—and that is also not good. We need to stay on the straight and

narrow path. Each of the twelve rules of this book—and their accompanying essays—

therefore provide a guide to being there. “There” is the dividing line between order and

chaos. That’s where we are simultaneously stable enough, exploring enough,

transforming enough, repairing enough, and cooperating enough. It’s there we find the

meaning that justifies life and its inevitable suffering. Perhaps, if we lived properly, we

would be able to tolerate the weight of our own self-consciousness. Perhaps, if we lived

properly, we could withstand the knowledge of our own fragility and mortality, without

the sense of aggrieved victimhood that produces, first, resentment, then envy, and then

the desire for vengeance and destruction. Perhaps, if we lived properly, we wouldn’t have

to turn to totalitarian certainty to shield ourselves from the knowledge of our own

insufficiency and ignorance. Perhaps we could come to avoid those pathways to Hell—and

we have seen in the terrible twentieth century just how real Hell can be.

I hope that these rules and their accompanying essays will help people understand what

they already know: that the soul of the individual eternally hungers for the heroism of

genuine Being, and that the willingness to take on that responsibility is identical to the

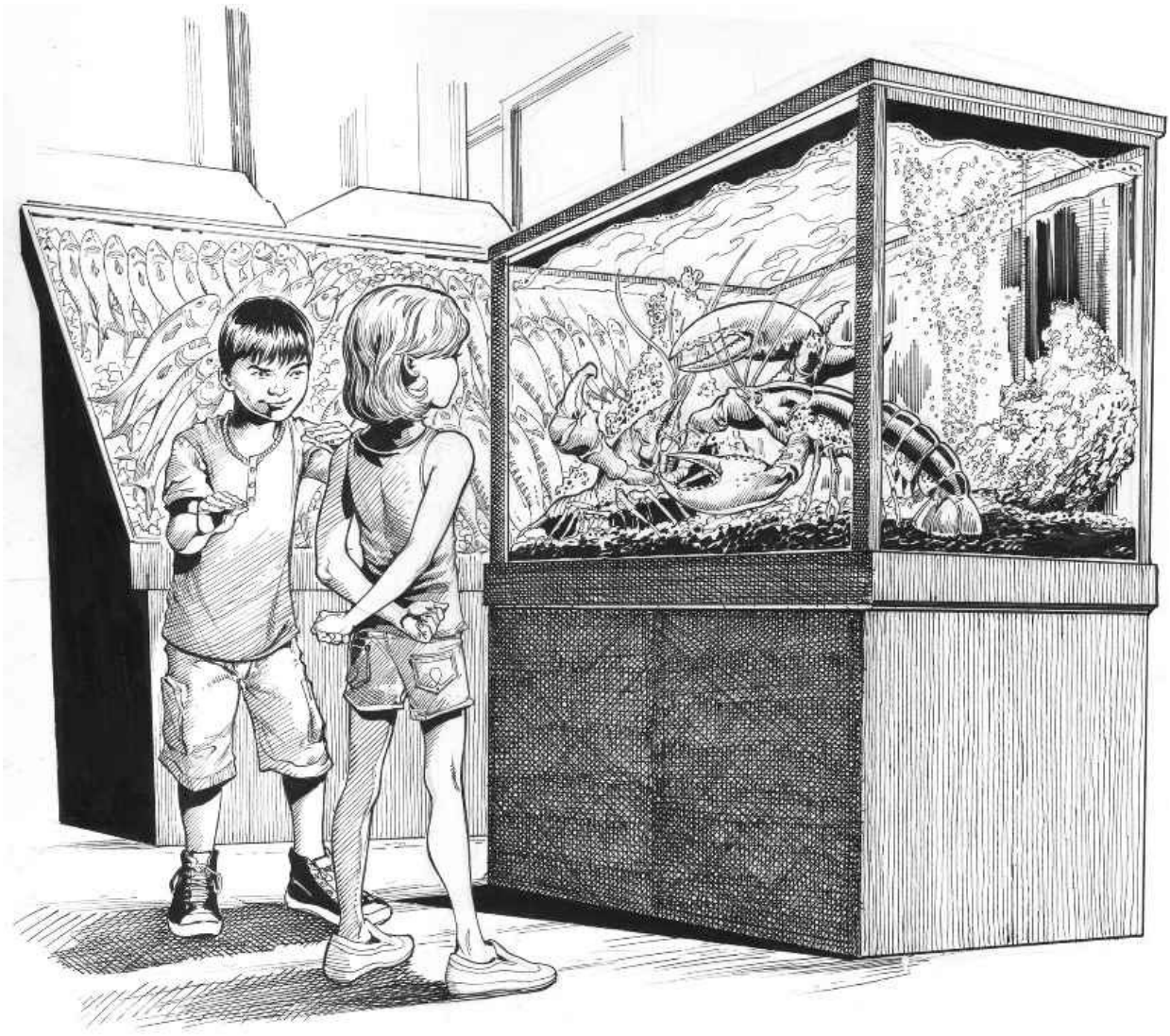
decision to live a meaningful life.

If we each live properly, we will collectively flourish.

Best wishes to you all, as you proceed through these pages.

Dr. Jordan B. Peterson

Clinical Psychologist and Professor of Psychology



21

22

R U L E 1

STAND UP STRAIGHT WITH YOUR SHOULDERS BACK

LOBSTERS—AND TERRITORY

If you are like most people, you don’t often think about lobsters[2]—unless you’re eating

one. However, these interesting and delicious crustaceans are very much worth

considering. Their nervous systems are comparatively simple, with large, easily observable

neurons, the magic cells of the brain. Because of this, scientists have been able to map the

neural circuitry of lobsters very accurately. This has helped us understand the structure

and function of the brain and behaviour of more complex animals, including human

beings. Lobsters have more in common with you than you might think (particularly when

you are feeling crabby—ha ha).

Lobsters live on the ocean floor. They need a home base down there, a range within

which they hunt for prey and scavenge around for stray edible bits and pieces of whatever

rains down from the continual chaos of carnage and death far above. They want

somewhere secure, where the hunting and the gathering is good. They want a home.

This can present a problem, since there are many lobsters. What if two of them occupy

the same territory, at the bottom of the ocean, at the same time, and both want to live

there? What if there are hundreds of lobsters, all trying to make a living and raise a

family, in the same crowded patch of sand and refuse?

Other creatures have this problem, too. When songbirds come north in the spring, for

example, they engage in ferocious territorial disputes. The songs they sing, so peaceful

and beautiful to human ears, are siren calls and cries of domination. A brilliantly musical

bird is a small warrior proclaiming his sovereignty. Take the wren, for example, a small,

feisty, insect-eating songbird common in North America. A newly arrived wren wants a

sheltered place to build a nest, away from the wind and rain. He wants it close to food,

and attractive to potential mates. He also wants to convince competitors for that space to

keep their distance.

Birds—and Territory

My dad and I designed a house for a wren family when I was ten years old. It looked like a

Conestoga wagon, and had a front entrance about the size of a quarter. This made it a

good house for wrens, who are tiny, and not so good for other, larger birds, who couldn't

get in. My elderly neighbour had a birdhouse, too, which we built for her at the same

time, from an old rubber boot. It had an opening large enough for a bird the size of a

robin. She was looking forward to the day it was occupied.

A wren soon discovered our birdhouse, and made himself at home there. We could hear

his lengthy, trilling song, repeated over and over, during the early spring. Once he'd built

his nest in the covered wagon, however, our new avian tenant started carrying small

sticks to our neighbour's nearby boot. He packed it so full that no other bird, large or

small, could possibly get in. Our neighbour was not pleased by this pre-emptive strike,

but there was nothing to be done about it. "If we take it down," said my dad, "clean it up,

and put it back in the tree, the wren will just pack it full of sticks again." Wrens are small,

and they're cute, but they're merciless.

I had broken my leg skiing the previous winter—first time down the hill—and had

received some money from a school insurance policy designed to reward unfortunate,

clumsy children. I purchased a cassette recorder (a high-tech novelty at the time) with the

proceeds. My dad suggested that I sit on the back lawn, record the wren's song, play it

back, and watch what happened. So, I went out into the bright spring sunlight and taped a

few minutes of the wren laying furious claim to his territory with song. Then I let him

hear his own voice. That little bird, one-third the size of a sparrow, began to dive-bomb

me and my cassette recorder, swooping back and forth, inches from the speaker. We saw

a lot of that sort of behaviour, even in the absence of the tape recorder. If a larger bird

ever dared to sit and rest in any of the trees near our birdhouse there was a good chance

he would get knocked off his perch by a kamikaze wren.

Now, wrens and lobsters are very different. Lobsters do not fly, sing or perch in trees.

Wrens have feathers, not hard shells. Wrens can't breathe underwater, and are seldom

served with butter. However, they are also similar in important ways. Both are obsessed

with status and position, for example, like a great many creatures. The Norwegian

zoologist and comparative psychologist Thorlief Schjelderup-Ebbe observed (back in

1921) that even common barnyard chickens establish a “pecking order.” 3

The determination of Who’s Who in the chicken world has important implications for

each individual bird’s survival, particularly in times of scarcity. The birds that always have

priority access to whatever food is sprinkled out in the yard in the morning are the

celebrity chickens. After them come the second-stringers, the hangers-on and wannabes.

Then the third-rate chickens have their turn, and so on, down to the bedraggled, partially-

feathered and badly-pecked wretches who occupy the lowest, untouchable stratum of the

chicken hierarchy.

Chickens, like suburbanites, live communally. Songbirds, such as wrens, do not, but

they still inhabit a dominance hierarchy. It’s just spread out over more territory. The

wiliest, strongest, healthiest and most fortunate birds occupy prime territory, and defend

it. Because of this, they are more likely to attract high-quality mates, and to hatch chicks

who survive and thrive. Protection from wind, rain and predators, as well as easy access to

superior food, makes for a much less stressed existence. Territory matters, and there is

little difference between territorial rights and social status. It is often a matter of life and

death.

If a contagious avian disease sweeps through a neighbourhood of well-stratified

songbirds, it is the least dominant and most stressed birds, occupying the lowest rungs of

the bird world, who are most likely to sicken and die. 4 This is equally true of human

neighbourhoods, when bird flu viruses and other illnesses sweep across the planet. The

poor and stressed always die first, and in greater numbers. They are also much more

susceptible to non-infectious diseases, such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease. When

the aristocracy catches a cold, as it is said, the working class dies of pneumonia.

Because territory matters, and because the best locales are always in short supply,

territory-seeking among animals produces conflict. Conflict, in turn, produces another

problem: how to win or lose without the disagreeing parties incurring too great a cost.

This latter point is particularly important. Imagine that two birds engage in a squabble

about a desirable nesting area. The interaction can easily degenerate into outright physical

combat. Under such circumstances, one bird, usually the largest, will eventually win—but

even the victor may be hurt by the fight. That means a third bird, an undamaged, canny

bystander, can move in, opportunistically, and defeat the now-crippled victor. That is not

at all a good deal for the first two birds.

Conflict—and Territory

Over the millennia, animals who must co-habit with others in the same territories have in

consequence learned many tricks to establish dominance, while risking the least amount

of possible damage. A defeated wolf, for example, will roll over on its back, exposing its

throat to the victor, who will not then deign to tear it out. The now-dominant wolf may

still require a future hunting partner, after all, even one as pathetic as his now-defeated

foe. Bearded dragons, remarkable social lizards, wave their front legs peaceably at one

another to indicate their wish for continued social harmony. Dolphins produce specialized

sound pulses while hunting and during other times of high excitement to reduce potential

conflict among dominant and subordinate group members. Such behavior is endemic in

the community of living things.

Lobsters, scuttling around on the ocean floor, are no exception. 5 If you catch a few

dozen, and transport them to a new location, you can observe their status-forming rituals

and techniques. Each lobster will first begin to explore the new territory, partly to map its

details, and partly to find a good place for shelter. Lobsters learn a lot about where they

live, and they remember what they learn. If you startle one near its nest, it will quickly zip

back and hide there. If you startle it some distance away, however, it will immediately

dart towards the nearest suitable shelter, previously identified and now remembered.

A lobster needs a safe hiding place to rest, free from predators and the forces of nature.

Furthermore, as lobsters grow, they moult, or shed their shells, which leaves them soft

and vulnerable for extended periods of time. A burrow under a rock makes a good lobster

home, particularly if it is located where shells and other detritus can be dragged into place

to cover the entrance, once the lobster is snugly ensconced inside. However, there may be

only a small number of high-quality shelters or hiding places in each new territory. They

are scarce and valuable. Other lobsters continually seek them out.

This means that lobsters often encounter one another when out exploring. Researchers

have demonstrated that even a lobster raised in isolation knows what to do when such a

thing happens.6 It has complex defensive and aggressive behaviours built right into its

nervous system. It begins to dance around, like a boxer, opening and raising its claws,

moving backward, forward, and side to side, mirroring its opponent, waving its opened

claws back and forth. At the same time, it employs special jets under its eyes to direct

streams of liquid at its opponent. The liquid spray contains a mix of chemicals that tell

the other lobster about its size, sex, health, and mood.

Sometimes one lobster can tell immediately from the display of claw size that it is

much smaller than its opponent, and will back down without a fight. The chemical

information exchanged in the spray can have the same effect, convincing a less healthy or

less aggressive lobster to retreat. That's dispute resolution Level 1. 7 If the two lobsters are very close in size and apparent ability, however, or if the exchange of liquid has been

insufficiently informative, they will proceed to dispute resolution Level 2. With antennae

whipping madly and claws folded downward, one will advance, and the other retreat.

Then the defender will advance, and the aggressor retreat. After a couple of rounds of this

behaviour, the more nervous of the lobsters may feel that continuing is not in his best

interest. He will flick his tail reflexively, dart backwards, and vanish, to try his luck

elsewhere. If neither blinks, however, the lobsters move to Level 3, which involves

genuine combat.

This time, the now enraged lobsters come at each other viciously, with their claws

extended, to grapple. Each tries to flip the other on its back. A successfully flipped lobster

will conclude that its opponent is capable of inflicting serious damage. It generally gives

up and leaves (although it harbours intense resentment and gossips endlessly about the

victor behind its back). If neither can overturn the other—or if one will not quit despite

being flipped—the lobsters move to Level 4. Doing so involves extreme risk, and is not

something to be engaged in without forethought: one or both lobsters will emerge

damaged from the ensuing fray, perhaps fatally.

The animals advance on each other, with increasing speed. Their claws are open, so

The animals advance on each other, with increasing speed. Their claws are open, so

they can grab a leg, or antenna, or an eye-stalk, or anything else exposed and vulnerable.

Once a body part has been successfully grabbed, the grabber will tail-flick backwards,

sharply, with claw clamped firmly shut, and try to tear it off. Disputes that have escalated

to this point typically create a clear winner and loser. The loser is unlikely to survive,

particularly if he or she remains in the territory occupied by the winner, now a mortal

enemy.

In the aftermath of a losing battle, regardless of how aggressively a lobster has behaved,

it becomes unwilling to fight further, even against another, previously defeated opponent.

A vanquished competitor loses confidence, sometimes for days. Sometimes the defeat can

have even more severe consequences. If a dominant lobster is badly defeated, its brain

basically dissolves. Then it grows a new, subordinate's brain—one more appropriate to its

new, lowly position. 8 Its original brain just isn't sophisticated to manage the

transformation from king to bottom dog without virtually complete dissolution and

regrowth. Anyone who has experienced a painful transformation after a serious defeat in

romance or career may feel some sense of kinship with the once successful crustacean.

The Neurochemistry of Defeat and Victory

A lobster loser's brain chemistry differs importantly from that of a lobster winner. This is

reflected in their relative postures. Whether a lobster is confident or cringing depends on

the ratio of two chemicals that modulate communication between lobster neurons:

serotonin and octopamine. Winning increases the ratio of the former to the latter.

A lobster with high levels of serotonin and low levels of octopamine is a cocky,

strutting sort of shellfish, much less likely to back down when challenged. This is because

serotonin helps regulate postural flexion. A flexed lobster extends its appendages so that

it can look tall and dangerous, like Clint Eastwood in a spaghetti Western. When a

lobster that has just lost a battle is exposed to serotonin, it will stretch itself out, advance

even on former victors, and fight longer and harder.[9] The drugs prescribed to depressed

human beings, which are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, have much the same

chemical and behavioural effect. In one of the more staggering demonstrations of the

evolutionary continuity of life on Earth, Prozac even cheers up lobsters. [10]

High serotonin/low octopamine characterizes the victor. The opposite neurochemical

configuration, a high ratio of octopamine to serotonin, produces a defeated-looking,

scrunched-up, inhibited, drooping, skulking sort of lobster, very likely to hang around

street corners, and to vanish at the first hint of trouble. Serotonin and octopamine also

regulate the tail-flick reflex, which serves to propel a lobster rapidly backwards when it

needs to escape. Less provocation is necessary to trigger that reflex in a defeated lobster.

You can see an echo of that in the heightened startle reflex characteristic of the soldier or

battered child with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Principle of Unequal Distribution

When a defeated lobster regains its courage and dares to fight again it is more likely to

lose again than you would predict, statistically, from a tally of its previous fights. Its

victorious opponent, on the other hand, is more likely to win. It's winner-take-all in the

lobster world, just as it is in human societies, where the top 1 percent have as much loot

as the bottom 50 percent11—and where the richest eighty-five people have as much as the

bottom three and a half billion.

That same brutal principle of unequal distribution applies outside the financial domain

—indeed, anywhere that creative production is required. The majority of scientific papers

are published by a very small group of scientists. A tiny proportion of musicians produces

almost all the recorded commercial music. Just a handful of authors sell all the books. A

million and a half separately titled books (!) sell each year in the US. However, only five

hundred of these sell more than a hundred thousand copies.[12] Similarly, just four classical

composers (Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky) wrote almost all the music played

by modern orchestras. Bach, for his part, composed so prolifically that it would take

decades of work merely to hand-copy his scores, yet only a small fraction of this

prodigious output is commonly performed. The same thing applies to the output of the

other three members of this group of hyper-dominant composers: only a small fraction of

their work is still widely played. Thus, a small fraction of the music composed by a small

fraction of all the classical composers who have ever composed makes up almost all the

classical music that the world knows and loves.

This principle is sometimes known as Price's law, after Derek J. de Solla Price,[13] the

researcher who discovered its application in science in 1963. It can be modelled using an

approximately L-shaped graph, with number of people on the vertical axis, and

productivity or resources on the horizontal. The basic principle had been discovered much

earlier. Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), an Italian polymath, noticed its applicability to

wealth distribution in the early twentieth century, and it appears true for every society

ever studied, regardless of governmental form. It also applies to the population of cities (a

very small number have almost all the people), the mass of heavenly bodies (a very small

number hoard all the matter), and the frequency of words in a language (90 percent of

communication occurs using just 500 words), among many other things. Sometimes it is

known as the Matthew Principle (Matthew 25:29), derived from what might be the

harshest statement ever attributed to Christ: “to those who have everything, more will be

given; from those who have nothing, everything will be taken.”

You truly know you are the Son of God when your dicta apply even to crustaceans.

Back to the fractious shellfish: it doesn't take that long before lobsters, testing each

other out, learn who can be messed with and who should be given a wide berth—and

once they have learned, the resultant hierarchy is exceedingly stable. All a victor needs to

do, once he has won, is to wiggle his antennae in a threatening manner, and a previous

opponent will vanish in a puff of sand before him. A weaker lobster will quit trying,

accept his lowly status, and keep his legs attached to his body. The top lobster, by

contrast—occupying the best shelter, getting some good rest, finishing a good meal—

parades his dominance around his territory, rousting subordinate lobsters from their

shelters at night, just to remind them who's their daddy.

All the Girls

The female lobsters (who also fight hard for territory during the explicitly maternal stages

of their existence14) identify the top guy quickly, and become irresistibly attracted to him.

This is brilliant strategy, in my estimation. It's also one used by females of many different

species, including humans. Instead of undertaking the computationally difficult task of

identifying the best man, the females outsource the problem to the machine-like

calculations of the dominance hierarchy. They let the males fight it out and peel their

paramours from the top. This is very much what happens with stock-market pricing,

where the value of any particular enterprise is determined through the competition of all.

When the females are ready to shed their shells and soften up a bit, they become

interested in mating. They start hanging around the dominant lobster's pad, spraying

attractive scents and aphrodisiacs towards him, trying to seduce him. His aggression has

made him successful, so he's likely to react in a dominant, irritable manner. Furthermore,

he's large, healthy and powerful. It's no easy task to switch his attention from fighting to

mating. (If properly charmed, however, he will change his behaviour towards the female.

This is the lobster equivalent of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the fastest-selling paperback of all

time, and the eternal Beauty-and-the-Beast plot of archetypal romance. This is the pattern

of behaviour continually represented in the sexually explicit literary fantasies that are as

popular among women as provocative images of naked women are among men.)

It should be pointed out, however, that sheer physical power is an unstable basis on

which to found lasting dominance, as the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal[15] has taken

pains to demonstrate. Among the chimp troupes he studied, males who were successful

in the longer term had to buttress their physical prowess with more sophisticated

attributes. Even the most brutal chimp despot can be taken down, after all, by two

opponents, each three-quarters as mean. In consequence, males who stay on top longer

are those who form reciprocal coalitions with their lower-status compatriots, and who pay

careful attention to the troupe's females and their infants. The political ploy of baby-

kissing is literally millions of years old. But lobsters are still comparatively primitive, so

the bare plot elements of Beast and Beauty suffice for them.

Once the Beast has been successfully charmed, the successful female (lobster) will

disrobe, shedding her shell, making herself dangerously soft, vulnerable, and ready to

mate. At the right moment, the male, now converted into a careful lover, deposits a

packet of sperm into the appropriate receptacle. Afterward, the female hangs around, and

hardens up for a couple of weeks (another phenomenon not entirely unknown among

human beings). At her leisure, she returns to her own domicile, laden with fertilized eggs.

At this point another female will attempt the same thing—and so on. The dominant male,

with his upright and confident posture, not only gets the prime real estate and easiest

access to the best hunting grounds. He also gets all the girls. It is exponentially more

worthwhile to be successful, if you are a lobster, and male.

Why is all this relevant? For an amazing number of reasons, apart from those that are

comically obvious. First, we know that lobsters have been around, in one form or another,

for more than 350 million years.16 This is a very long time. Sixty-five million years ago,

there were still dinosaurs. That is the unimaginably distant past to us. To the lobsters,

however, dinosaurs were the *nouveau riche*, who appeared and disappeared in the flow of

near-eternal time. This means that dominance hierarchies have been an essentially

permanent feature of the environment to which all complex life has adapted. A third of a

billion years ago, brains and nervous systems were comparatively simple. Nonetheless,

they already had the structure and neurochemistry necessary to process information

about status and society. The importance of this fact can hardly be overstated.

The Nature of Nature

It is a truism of biology that evolution is conservative. When something evolves, it must

build upon what nature has already produced. New features may be added, and old

features may undergo some alteration, but most things remain the same. It is for this

reason that the wings of bats, the hands of human beings, and the fins of whales look

astonishingly alike in their skeletal form. They even have the same number of bones.

Evolution laid down the cornerstones for basic physiology long ago.

Now evolution works, in large part, through variation and natural selection. Variation

exists for many reasons, including gene-shuffling (to put it simply) and random mutation.

Individuals vary within a species for such reasons. Nature chooses from among them,

across time. That theory, as stated, appears to account for the continual alteration of life-

forms over the eons. But there's an additional question lurking under the surface: what

exactly is the "nature" in "natural selection"? What exactly is "the environment" to which

animals adapt? We make many assumptions about nature—about the environment—and

these have consequences. Mark Twain once said, "It's not what we don't know that gets

us in trouble. It's what we know for sure that just ain't so."

First, it is easy to assume that "nature" is something with a nature—something static.

But it's not: at least not in any simple sense. It's static and dynamic, at the same time.

The environment—the nature that selects—itself transforms. The famous yin and yang

symbols of the Taoists capture this beautifully. Being, for the Taoists—reality itself—is

composed of two opposing principles, often translated as feminine and masculine, or even

more narrowly as female and male. However, yin and yang are more accurately

understood as chaos and order. The Taoist symbol is a circle enclosing twin serpents,

head to tail. The black serpent, chaos, has a white dot in its head. The white serpent,

order, has a black dot in its head. This is because chaos and order are interchangeable, as

well as eternally juxtaposed. There is nothing so certain that it cannot vary. Even the sun

itself has its cycles of instability. Likewise, there is nothing so mutable that it cannot be

fixed. Every revolution produces a new order. Every death is, simultaneously, a

metamorphosis.

Considering nature as purely static produces serious errors of apprehension. Nature

"selects." The idea of *selects* contains implicitly nested within it the idea of *fitness*. It is

"fitness" that is "selected." Fitness, roughly speaking, is the probability that a given

organism will leave offspring (will propagate its genes through time). The "fit" in

"fitness" is therefore the matching of organismal attribute to environmental demand. If

that demand is conceptualized as static—if nature is conceptualized as eternal and

unchanging—then evolution is a never-ending series of linear improvements, and fitness

is something that can be ever more closely approximated across time. The still-powerful

Victorian idea of evolutionary progress, with man at the pinnacle, is a partial consequence

of this model of nature. It produces the erroneous notion that there is a destination of

natural selection (increasing fitness to the environment), and that it can be

conceptualized as a fixed point.

But nature, the selecting agent, is not a static selector—not in any simple sense. Nature

dresses differently for each occasion. Nature varies like a musical score—and that, in part,

explains why music produces its deep intimations of meaning. As the environment

supporting a species transforms and changes, the features that make a given individual

successful in surviving and reproducing also transform and change. Thus, the theory of

natural selection does not posit creatures matching themselves ever more precisely to a

template specified by the world. It is more that creatures are in a dance with nature, albeit

one that is deadly. “In my kingdom,” as the Red Queen tells Alice in Wonderland, “you

have to run as fast as you can just to stay in the same place.” No one standing still can

triumph, no matter how well constituted.

Nature is not simply dynamic, either. Some things change quickly, but they are nested

within other things that change less quickly (music frequently models this, too). Leaves

change more quickly than trees, and trees more quickly than forests. Weather changes

faster than climate. If it wasn’t this way, then the conservatism of evolution would not

work, as the basic morphology of arms and hands would have to change as fast as the

length of arm bones and the function of fingers. It’s chaos, within order, within chaos,

within higher order. The order that is most real is the order that is most unchanging—

and that is not necessarily the order that is most easily seen. The leaf, when perceived,

might blind the observer to the tree. The tree can blind him to the forest. And some

things that are most real (such as the ever-present dominance hierarchy) cannot be

“seen” at all.

It is also a mistake to conceptualize nature romantically. Rich, modern city-dwellers,

surrounded by hot, baking concrete, imagine the environment as something pristine and

paradisal, like a French impressionist landscape. Eco-activists, even more idealistic in

their viewpoint, envision nature as harmoniously balanced and perfect, absent the

disruptions and depredations of mankind. Unfortunately, “the environment” is also

elephantiasis and guinea worms (don’t ask), anopheles mosquitoes and malaria,

starvation-level droughts, AIDS and the Black Plague. We don’t fantasize about the

beauty of these aspects of nature, although they are just as real as their Edenic

counterparts. It is because of the existence of such things, of course, that we attempt to

modify our surroundings, protecting our children, building cities and transportation

systems and growing food and generating power. If Mother Nature wasn’t so hell-bent on

our destruction, it would be easier for us to exist in simple harmony with her dictates.

And this brings us to a third erroneous concept: that nature is something strictly

segregated from the cultural constructs that have emerged within it. The order within the

chaos and order of Being is all the more “natural” the longer it has lasted. This is because

“nature” is “what selects,” and the longer a feature has existed the more time it has had

to be selected—and to shape life. It does not matter whether that feature is physical and

biological, or social and cultural. All that matters, from a Darwinian perspective, is

permanence—and the dominance hierarchy, however social or cultural it might appear,

has been around for some half a billion years. It’s permanent. It’s real. The dominance

hierarchy is not capitalism. It’s not communism, either, for that matter. It’s not the

military-industrial complex. It’s not the patriarchy—that disposable, malleable, arbitrary

cultural artefact. It’s not even a human creation; not in the most profound sense. It is

instead a near-eternal aspect of the environment, and much of what is blamed on these

more ephemeral manifestations is a consequence of its unchanging existence. We (the

sovereign *we*, the *we* that has been around since the beginning of life) have lived in a

dominance hierarchy for a long, long time. We were struggling for position before we had

skin, or hands, or lungs, or bones. There is little more natural than culture. Dominance

hierarchies are older than trees.

The part of our brain that keeps track of our position in the dominance hierarchy is

therefore exceptionally ancient and fundamental.17 It is a master control system,

modulating our perceptions, values, emotions, thoughts and actions. It powerfully affects

every aspect of our Being, conscious and unconscious alike. This is why, when we are

defeated, we act very much like lobsters who have lost a fight. Our posture droops. We

face the ground. We feel threatened, hurt, anxious and weak. If things do not improve, we

become chronically depressed. Under such conditions, we can't easily put up the kind of

fight that life demands, and we become easy targets for harder-shelled bullies. And it is

not only the behavioural and experiential similarities that are striking. Much of the basic

neurochemistry is the same.

Consider serotonin, the chemical that governs posture and escape in the lobster. Low-

ranking lobsters produce comparatively low levels of serotonin. This is also true of low-

ranking human beings (and those low levels decrease more with each defeat). Low

serotonin means decreased confidence. Low serotonin means more response to stress and

costlier physical preparedness for emergency—as anything whatsoever may happen, at

any time, at the bottom of the dominance hierarchy (and rarely something good). Low

serotonin means less happiness, more pain and anxiety, more illness, and a shorter

lifespan—among humans, just as among crustaceans. Higher spots in the dominance

hierarchy, and the higher serotonin levels typical of those who inhabit them, are

characterized by less illness, misery and death, even when factors such as absolute income

—or number of decaying food scraps—are held constant. The importance of this can

hardly be overstated.

Top and Bottom

There is an unspeakably primordial calculator, deep within you, at the very foundation of

your brain, far below your thoughts and feelings. It monitors exactly where you are

positioned in society—on a scale of one to ten, for the sake of argument. If you're a

number one, the highest level of status, you're an overwhelming success. If you're male,

you have preferential access to the best places to live and the highest-quality food. People

compete to do you favours. You have limitless opportunity for romantic and sexual

contact. You are a successful lobster, and the most desirable females line up and vie for

your attention. 18

If you're female, you have access to many high-quality suitors: tall, strong and

symmetrical; creative, reliable, honest and generous. And, like your dominant male

counterpart, you will compete ferociously, even pitilessly, to maintain or improve your

position in the equally competitive female mating hierarchy. Although you are less likely

to use physical aggression to do so, there are many effective verbal tricks and strategies at

your disposal, including the disparaging of opponents, and you may well be expert at their

use.

If you are a low-status ten, by contrast, male or female, you have nowhere to live (or

nowhere good). Your food is terrible, when you're not going hungry. You're in poor

physical and mental condition. You're of minimal romantic interest to anyone, unless

they are as desperate as you. You are more likely to fall ill, age rapidly, and die young,

with few, if any, to mourn you. 19 Even money itself may prove of little use. You won't

know how to use it, because it is difficult to use money properly, particularly if you are

unfamiliar with it. Money will make you liable to the dangerous temptations of drugs and

alcohol, which are much more rewarding if you have been deprived of pleasure for a long

period. Money will also make you a target for predators and psychopaths, who thrive on

exploiting those who exist on the lower rungs of society. The bottom of the dominance

hierarchy is a terrible, dangerous place to be.

The ancient part of your brain specialized for assessing dominance watches how you are

treated by other people. On that evidence, it renders a determination of your value and

assigns you a status. If you are judged by your peers as of little worth, the counter

restricts serotonin availability. That makes you much more physically and psychologically

reactive to any circumstance or event that might produce emotion, particularly if it is

negative. You need that reactivity. Emergencies are common at the bottom, and you must

be ready to survive.

Unfortunately, that physical hyper-response, that constant alertness, burns up a lot of

precious energy and physical resources. This response is really what everyone calls stress,

and it is by no means only or even primarily psychological. It's a reflection of the genuine

constraints of unfortunate circumstances. When operating at the bottom, the ancient

brain counter assumes that even the smallest unexpected impediment might produce an

uncontrollable chain of negative events, which will have to be handled alone, as useful

friends are rare indeed, on society's fringes. You will therefore continually sacrifice what

you could otherwise physically store for the future, using it up on heightened readiness

and the possibility of immediate panicked action in the present. When you don't know

what to do, you must be prepared to do anything and everything, in case it becomes

necessary. You're sitting in your car with the gas and brake pedals both punched to the

mat. Too much of that and everything falls apart. The ancient counter will even shut

down your immune system, expending the energy and resources required for future

health now, during the crises of the present. It will render you impulsive,[20] so that you

will jump, for example, at any short-term mating opportunities, or any possibilities of

pleasure, no matter how sub-par, disgraceful or illegal. It will leave you far more likely to

live, or die, carelessly, for a rare opportunity at pleasure, when it manifests itself. The

physical demands of emergency preparedness will wear you down in every way. [21]

31

If you have a high status, on the other hand, the counter's cold, pre-reptilian mechanics

assume that your niche is secure, productive and safe, and that you are well buttressed

with social support. It thinks the chance that something will damage you is low and can

be safely discounted. Change might be opportunity, instead of disaster. The serotonin

flows plentifully. This renders you confident and calm, standing tall and straight, and

much less on constant alert. Because your position is secure, the future is likely to be

good for you. It's worthwhile to think in the long term and plan for a better tomorrow.

You don't need to grasp impulsively at whatever crumbs come your way, because you can

realistically expect good things to remain available. You can delay gratification, without

forgoing it forever. You can afford to be a reliable and thoughtful citizen.

Malfunction

Sometimes, however, the counter mechanism can go wrong. Erratic habits of sleeping and

eating can interfere with its function. Uncertainty can throw it for a loop. The body, with

its various parts, needs to function like a well-rehearsed orchestra. Every system must

play its role properly, and at exactly the right time, or noise and chaos ensue. It is for this

reason that routine is so necessary. The acts of life we repeat every day need to be

automatized. They must be turned into stable and reliable habits, so they lose their

complexity and gain predictability and simplicity. This can be perceived most clearly in

the case of small children, who are delightful and comical and playful when their sleeping

and eating schedules are stable, and horrible and whiny and nasty when they are not.

It is for such reasons that I always ask my clinical clients first about sleep. Do they

wake up in the morning at approximately the time the typical person wakes up, and at the

same time every day? If the answer is no, fixing that is the first thing I recommend. It

doesn't matter so much if they go to bed at the same time each evening, but waking up at

a consistent hour is a necessity. Anxiety and depression cannot be easily treated if the

sufferer has unpredictable daily routines. The systems that mediate negative emotion are

tightly tied to the properly cyclical circadian rhythms.

The next thing I ask about is breakfast. I counsel my clients to eat a fat and protein-

heavy breakfast as soon as possible after they awaken (no simple carbohydrates, no

sugars, as they are digested too rapidly, and produce a blood-sugar spike and rapid dip).

This is because anxious and depressed people are already stressed, particularly if their

lives have not been under control for a good while. Their bodies are therefore primed to

hypersecrete insulin, if they engage in any complex or demanding activity. If they do so

after fasting all night and before eating, the excess insulin in their bloodstream will mop

up all their blood sugar. Then they become hypoglycemic and psycho-physiologically

unstable. 22 All day. Their systems cannot be reset until after more sleep. I have had many

clients whose anxiety was reduced to subclinical levels merely because they started to

sleep on a predictable schedule and eat breakfast.

Other bad habits can also interfere with the counter's accuracy. Sometimes this

happens directly, for poorly understood biological reasons, and sometimes it happens

because those habits initiate a complex positive feedback loop. A positive feedback loop

requires an input detector, an amplifier, and some form of output. Imagine a signal picked

up by the input detector, amplified, and then emitted, in amplified form. So far, so good.

The trouble starts when the input detector detects that output, and runs it through the

system again, amplifying and emitting it again. A few rounds of intensification and things

get dangerously out of control.

Most people have been subject to the deafening howling of feedback at a concert, when

the sound system squeals painfully. The microphone sends a signal to the speakers. The

speakers emit the signal. The signal can be picked up by the microphone and sent through

the system again, if it's too loud or too close to the speakers. The sound rapidly amplifies

to unbearable levels, sufficient to destroy the speakers, if it continues.

The same destructive loop happens within people's lives. Much of the time, when it

happens, we label it mental illness, even though it's not only or even at all occurring

inside people's psyches. Addiction to alcohol or another mood-altering drug is a common

positive-feedback process. Imagine a person who enjoys alcohol, perhaps a bit too much.

He has a quick three or four drinks. His blood alcohol level spikes sharply. This can be

extremely exhilarating, particularly for someone who has a genetic predisposition to

alcoholism. 23 But it only occurs while blood alcohol levels are actively rising, and that

only continues if the drinker keeps drinking. When he stops, not only does his blood

alcohol level plateau and then start to sink, but his body begins to produce a variety of

toxins, as it metabolizes the ethanol already consumed. He also starts to experience

alcohol withdrawal, as the anxiety systems that were suppressed during intoxication start

to hyper-respond. A hangover is alcohol withdrawal (which quite frequently kills

withdrawing alcoholics), and it starts all too soon after drinking ceases. To continue the

warm glow, and stave off the unpleasant aftermath, the drinker may just continue to

drink, until all the liquor in his house is consumed, the bars are closed and his money is

spent.

The next day, the drinker wakes up, badly hungover. So far, this is just unfortunate.

The real trouble starts when he discovers that his hangover can be “cured” with a few

more drinks the morning after. Such a cure is, of course, temporary. It merely pushes the

withdrawal symptoms a bit further into the future. But that might be what is required, in

the short term, if the misery is sufficiently acute. So now he has learned to drink to cure

his hangover. When the medication causes the disease, a positive feedback loop has been

established. Alcoholism can quickly emerge under such conditions.

Something similar often happens to people who develop an anxiety disorder, such as

agoraphobia. People with agoraphobia can become so overwhelmed with fear that they

will no longer leave their homes. Agoraphobia is the consequence of a positive feedback

loop. The first event that precipitates the disorder is often a panic attack. The sufferer is

typically a middle-aged woman who has been too dependent on other people. Perhaps she

went immediately from over-reliance on her father to a relationship with an older and

comparatively dominant boyfriend or husband, with little or no break for independent

existence.

In the weeks leading up to the emergence of her agoraphobia, such a woman typically

experiences something unexpected and anomalous. It might be something physiological,

such as heart palpitations, which are common in any case, and whose likelihood is

increased during menopause, when the hormonal processes regulating a women's

psychological experience fluctuate unpredictably. Any perceptible alteration in heart-rate

can trigger thoughts both of heart attack and an all-too-public and embarrassing display

of post-heart attack distress and suffering (death and social humiliation constituting the

two most basic fears). The unexpected occurrence might instead be conflict in the

sufferer's marriage, or the illness or death of a spouse. It might be a close friend's divorce

or hospitalization. Some real event typically precipitates the initial increase in fear of

mortality and social judgment.[24]

After the shock, perhaps, the pre-agoraphobic woman leaves her house, and makes her

way to the shopping mall. It's busy and difficult to park. This makes her even more

stressed. The thoughts of vulnerability occupying her mind since her recent unpleasant

experience rise close to the surface. They trigger anxiety. Her heart rate rises. She begins

to breathe shallowly and quickly. She feels her heart racing and begins to wonder if she is

suffering a heart attack. This thought triggers more anxiety. She breathes even more

shallowly, increasing the levels of carbon dioxide in her blood. Her heart rate increases

again, because of her additional fear. She detects that, and her heart rate rises again.

Poof! Positive feedback loop. Soon the anxiety transforms into panic, regulated by a

different brain system, designed for the severest of threats, which can be triggered by too

much fear. She is overwhelmed by her symptoms, and heads for the emergency room,

where after an anxious wait her heart function is checked. There is nothing wrong. But

she is not reassured.

It takes an additional feedback loop to transform even that unpleasant experience into

full-blown agoraphobia. The next time she needs to go to the mall, the pre-agoraphobic

becomes anxious, remembering what happened last time. But she goes, anyway. On the

way, she can feel her heart pounding. That triggers another cycle of anxiety and concern.

To forestall panic, she avoids the stress of the mall and returns home. But now the

anxiety systems in her brain note that she ran away from the mall, and conclude that the

journey there was truly dangerous. Our anxiety systems are very practical. They assume

that anything you run away from is dangerous. The proof of that is, of course, the fact you

ran away.

So now the mall is tagged “too dangerous to approach” (or the budding agoraphobic

has labelled herself, “too fragile to approach the mall”). Perhaps that is not yet taking

things far enough to cause her real trouble. There are other places to shop. But maybe the

nearby supermarket is mall-like enough to trigger a similar response, when she visits it

instead, and then retreats. Now the supermarket occupies the same category. Then it’s

the corner store. Then it's buses and taxis and subways. Soon it's everywhere. The

agoraphobic will even eventually become afraid of her house, and would run away from

that if she could. But she can't. Soon she's stuck in her home. Anxiety-induced retreat

makes everything retreated from more anxiety-inducing. Anxiety-induced retreat makes

the self smaller and the ever-more-dangerous world larger.

There are many systems of interaction between brain, body and social world that can

get caught in positive feedback loops. Depressed people, for example, can start feeling

useless and burdensome, as well as grief-stricken and pained. This makes them withdraw

from contact with friends and family. Then the withdrawal makes them more lonesome

and isolated, and more likely to feel useless and burdensome. Then they withdraw more.

In this manner, depression spirals and amplifies.

If someone is badly hurt at some point in life—traumatized—the dominance counter

can transform in a manner that makes additional hurt more rather than less likely. This

often happens in the case of people, now adults, who were viciously bullied during

childhood or adolescence. They become anxious and easily upset. They shield themselves

with a defensive crouch, and avoid the direct eye contact interpretable as a dominance

challenge.

This means that the damage caused by the bullying (the lowering of status and

confidence) can continue, even after the bullying has ended. 25 In the simplest of cases,

the formerly lowly persons have matured and moved to new and more successful places in

their lives. But they don't fully notice. Their now-counterproductive physiological

adaptations to earlier reality remain, and they are more stressed and uncertain than is

necessary. In more complex cases, a habitual assumption of subordination renders the

person more stressed and uncertain than necessary, *and* their habitually submissive

posturing continues to attract genuine negative attention from one or more of the fewer

and generally less successful bullies still extant in the adult world. In such situations, the

psychological consequence of the previous bullying increases the likelihood of continued

bullying in the present (even though, strictly speaking, it wouldn't have to, because of

maturation, or geographical relocation, or continued education, or improvement in

objective status).

34

Rising Up

Sometimes people are bullied because they *can't* fight back. This can happen to people

who are weaker, physically, than their opponents. This is one of the most common

reasons for the bullying experienced by children. Even the toughest of six-year-olds is no

match for someone who is nine. A lot of that power differential disappears in adulthood,

however, with the rough stabilization and matching of physical size (with the exception

of that pertaining to men and women, with the former typically larger and stronger,

particularly in the upper body) as well as the increased penalties generally applied in

adulthood to those who insist upon continuing with physical intimidation.

But just as often, people are bullied because they *won't* fight back. This happens not

infrequently to people who are by temperament compassionate and self-sacrificing—

particularly if they are also high in negative emotion, and make a lot of gratifying noises

of suffering when someone sadistic confronts them (children who cry more easily, for

example, are more frequently bullied).[26] It also happens to people who have decided, for

one reason or another, that all forms of aggression, including even feelings of anger, are

morally wrong. I have seen people with a particularly acute sensitivity to petty tyranny

and over-aggressive competitiveness restrict within themselves all the emotions that

might give rise to such things. Often they are people whose fathers who were excessively

angry and controlling. Psychological forces are never unidimensional in their value,

however, and the truly appalling potential of anger and aggression to produce cruelty and

mayhem are balanced by the ability of those primordial forces to push back against

oppression, speak truth, and motivate resolute movement forward in times of strife,

uncertainty and danger.

With their capacity for aggression strait-jacketed within a too-narrow morality, those

who are only or merely compassionate and self-sacrificing (and naïve and exploitable)

cannot call forth the genuinely righteous and appropriately self-protective anger necessary

to defend themselves. If you *can* bite, you generally don't *have to*. When skillfully

integrated, the ability to respond with aggression and violence decreases rather than

increases the probability that actual aggression will become necessary. If you say no, early

in the cycle of oppression, and you mean what you say (which means you state your

refusal in no uncertain terms and stand behind it) then the scope for oppression on the

part of oppressor will remain properly bounded and limited. The forces of tyranny expand

inexorably to fill the space made available for their existence. People who refuse to

muster appropriately self-protective territorial responses are laid open to exploitation as

much as those who genuinely can't stand up for their own rights because of a more

essential inability or a true imbalance in power.

Naive, harmless people usually guide their perceptions and actions with a few simple

axioms: people are basically good; no one really wants to hurt anyone else; the threat

(and, certainly, the use) of force, physical or otherwise, is wrong. These axioms collapse,

or worse, in the presence of individuals who are genuinely malevolent. 27 *Worse* means that naive beliefs can become a positive invitation to abuse, because those who aim to

harm have become specialized to prey on people who think precisely such things. Under

such conditions, the axioms of harmlessness must be retooled. In my clinical practice I

often draw the attention of my clients who think that good people never become angry to

the stark realities of their own resentments.

No one likes to be pushed around, but people often put up with it for too long. So, I get

them to see their resentment, first, as anger, and then as an indication that something

needs to be said, if not done (not least because honesty demands it). Then I get them to

see such action as part of the force that holds tyranny at bay—at the social level, as much

as the individual. Many bureaucracies have petty authoritarians within them, generating

unnecessary rules and procedures simply to express and cement power. Such people

produce powerful undercurrents of resentment around them which, if expressed, would

limit their expression of pathological power. It is in this manner that the willingness of

the individual to stand up for him or herself protects everyone from the corruption of

society.

When naive people discover the capacity for anger within themselves, they are shocked,

sometimes severely. A profound example of that can be found in the susceptibility of new

soldiers to post-traumatic stress disorder, which often occurs because of something they

watch themselves doing, rather than because of something that has happened to them.

They react like the monsters they can truly be in extreme battlefield conditions, and the

revelation of that capacity undoes their world. And no wonder. Perhaps they assumed

that all of history's terrible perpetrators were people totally unlike themselves. Perhaps

they were never able to see within themselves the capacity for oppression and bullying

(and perhaps not their capacity for assertion and success, as well). I have had clients who

were terrified into literally years of daily hysterical convulsions by the sheer look of

malevolence on their attackers' faces. Such individuals typically come from hyper-

sheltered families, where nothing terrible is allowed to exist, and everything is fairyland

wonderful (or else).

When the wakening occurs—when once-naïve people recognize in themselves the seeds

of evil and monstrosity, and see themselves as dangerous (at least potentially) their fear

decreases. They develop more self-respect. Then, perhaps, they begin to resist oppression.

They see that they have the ability to withstand, because they are terrible too. They see

they can and must stand up, because they begin to understand how genuinely monstrous

they will become, otherwise, feeding on their resentment, transforming it into the most

destructive of wishes. To say it again: There is very little difference between the capacity

for mayhem and destruction, integrated, and strength of character. This is one of the most

difficult lessons of life.

Maybe you are a loser. And maybe you're not—but if you are, you don't have to

continue in that mode. Maybe you just have a bad habit. Maybe you're even just a

collection of bad habits. Nonetheless, even if you came by your poor posture honestly—

even if you were unpopular or bullied at home or in grade school28—it's not necessarily

appropriate now. Circumstances change. If you slump around, with the same bearing that

characterizes a defeated lobster, people will assign you a lower status, and the old counter

that you share with crustaceans, sitting at the very base of your brain, will assign you a

low dominance number. Then your brain will not produce as much serotonin. This will

make you less happy, and more anxious and sad, and more likely to back down when you

should stand up for yourself. It will also decrease the probability that you will get to live

in a good neighbourhood, have access to the highest quality resources, and obtain a

healthy, desirable mate. It will render you more likely to abuse cocaine and alcohol, as

you live for the present in a world full of uncertain futures. It will increase your

susceptibility to heart disease, cancer and dementia. All in all, it’s just not good.

Circumstances change, and so can you. Positive feedback loops, adding effect to effect,

can spiral counterproductively in a negative direction, but can also work to get you ahead.

That’s the other, far more optimistic lesson of Price’s law and the Pareto distribution:

those who start to have will probably get more. Some of these upwardly moving loops can

occur in your own private, subjective space. Alterations in body language offer an

important example. If you are asked by a researcher to move your facial muscles, one at a

time, into a position that would look sad to an observer, you will report feeling sadder. If

you are asked to move the muscles one by one into a position that looks happy, you will

report feeling happier. Emotion is partly bodily expression, and can be amplified (or

dampened) by that expression.[29]

Some of the positive feedback loops instantiated by body language can occur beyond the

Some of the positive feedback loops instantiated by body language can occur beyond the

private confines of subjective experience, in the social space you share with other people.

If your posture is poor, for example—if you slump, shoulders forward and rounded, chest

tucked in, head down, looking small, defeated and ineffectual (protected, in theory,

against attack from behind)—then you will feel small, defeated and ineffectual. The

reactions of others will amplify that. People, like lobsters, size each other up, partly in

consequence of stance. If you present yourself as defeated, then people will react to you as

if you are losing. If you start to straighten up, then people will look at and treat you

differently.

You might object: the bottom is real. Being at the bottom is equally real. A mere

transformation of posture is insufficient to change anything that fixed. If you're in

number ten position, then standing up straight and appearing dominant might only

attract the attention of those who want, once again, to put you down. And fair enough.

But standing up straight with your shoulders back is not something that is only physical,

because you're not only a body. You're a spirit, so to speak—a psyche—as well. Standing

up physically also implies and invokes and demands standing up metaphysically. Standing

up means voluntarily accepting the burden of Being. Your nervous system responds in an

entirely different manner when you face the demands of life voluntarily. You respond to a

challenge, instead of bracing for a catastrophe. You see the gold the dragon hoards,

instead of shrinking in terror from the all-too-real fact of the dragon. You step forward to

take your place in the dominance hierarchy, and occupy your territory, manifesting your

willingness to defend, expand and transform it. That can all occur practically or

symbolically, as a physical or as a conceptual restructuring.

To stand up straight with your shoulders back is to accept the terrible responsibility of

life, with eyes wide open. It means deciding to voluntarily transform the chaos of

potential into the realities of habitable order. It means adopting the burden of self-

conscious vulnerability, and accepting the end of the unconscious paradise of childhood,

where finitude and mortality are only dimly comprehended. It means willingly

undertaking the sacrifices necessary to generate a productive and meaningful reality (it

means acting to please God, in the ancient language).

To stand up straight with your shoulders back means building the ark that protects the

world from the flood, guiding your people through the desert after they have escaped

tyranny, making your way away from comfortable home and country, and speaking the

prophetic word to those who ignore the widows and children. It means shouldering the

cross that marks the X, the place where you and Being intersect so terribly. It means

casting dead, rigid and too tyrannical order back into the chaos in which it was generated;

it means withstanding the ensuing uncertainty, and establishing, in consequence, a better,

more meaningful and more productive order.

So, attend carefully to your posture. Quit drooping and hunching around. Speak your

mind. Put your desires forward, as if you had a right to them—at least the same right as

others. Walk tall and gaze forthrightly ahead. Dare to be dangerous. Encourage the

serotonin to flow plentifully through the neural pathways desperate for its calming

influence.

People, including yourself, will start to assume that you are competent and able (or at

least they will not immediately conclude the reverse). Emboldened by the positive

responses you are now receiving, you will begin to be less anxious. You will then find it

easier to pay attention to the subtle social clues that people exchange when they are

communicating. Your conversations will flow better, with fewer awkward pauses. This

will make you more likely to meet people, interact with them, and impress them. Doing

so will not only genuinely increase the probability that good things will happen to you—it

will also make those good things feel better when they do happen.

37

Thus strengthened and emboldened, you may choose to embrace Being, and work for

its furtherance and improvement. Thus strengthened, you may be able to stand, even

during the illness of a loved one, even during the death of a parent, and allow others to

find strength alongside you when they would otherwise be overwhelmed with despair.

Thus emboldened, you will embark on the voyage of your life, let your light shine, so to

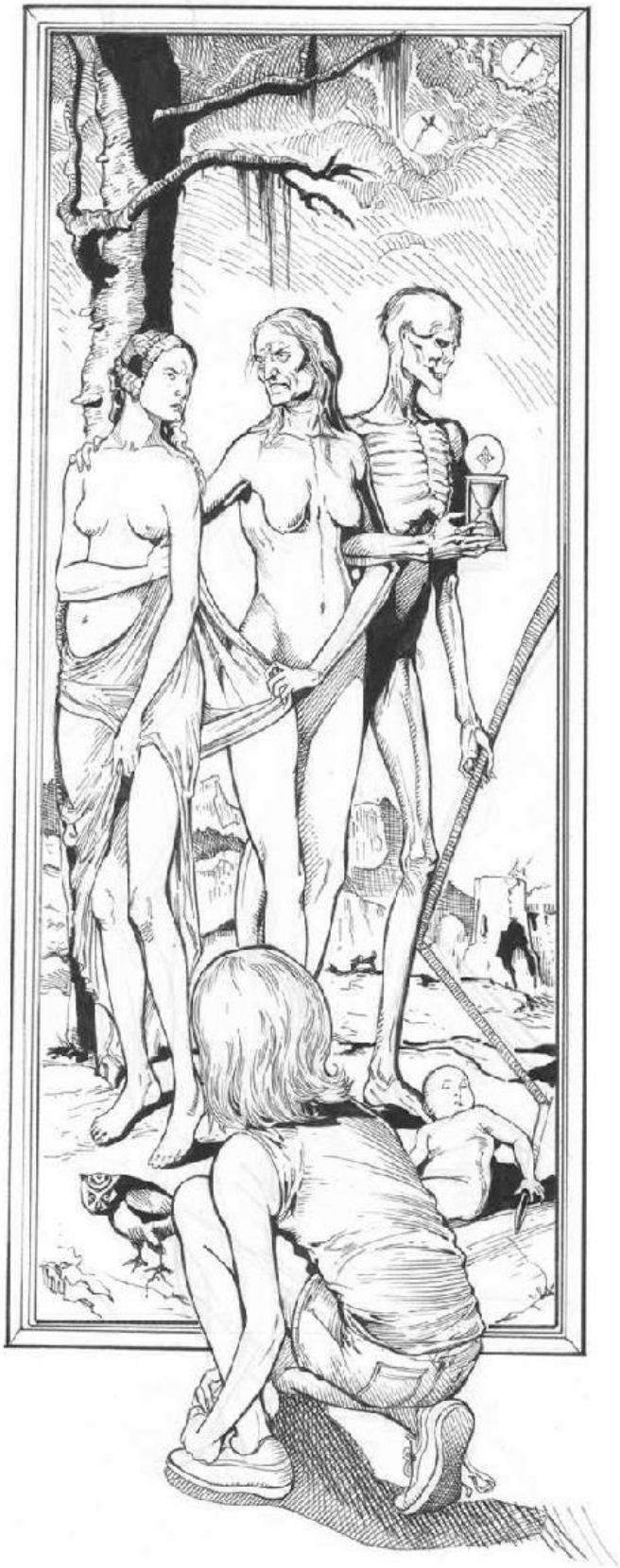
speak, on the heavenly hill, and pursue your rightful destiny. Then the meaning of your

life may be sufficient to keep the corrupting influence of mortal despair at bay.

Then you may be able to accept the terrible burden of the World, and find joy.

Look for your inspiration to the victorious lobster, with its 350 million years of

practical wisdom. Stand up straight, with your shoulders back.



R U L E 2

TREAT YOURSELF LIKE SOMEONE YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE

FOR HELPING

WHY WON'T YOU JUST TAKE YOUR DAMN PILLS?

Imagine that a hundred people are prescribed a drug. Consider what happens next. One-

third of them won't fill the prescription.[30] Half of the remaining sixty-seven will fill it, but

won't take the medication correctly. They'll miss doses. They'll quit taking it early. They

might not even take it at all.

Physicians and pharmacists tend to blame such patients for their noncompliance,

inaction and error. You can lead a horse to water, they reason. Psychologists tend to take

a dim view of such judgments. We are trained to assume that the failure of patients to

follow professional advice is the fault of the practitioner, not the patient. We believe the

health-care provider has a responsibility to profer advice that will be followed, offer

interventions that will be respected, plan with the patient or client until the desired result

is achieved, and follow up to ensure that everything is going correctly. This is just one of

the many things that make psychologists so wonderful – :). Of course, we have the luxury

of time with our clients, unlike other more beleaguered professionals, who wonder why

sick people won't take their medication. What's wrong with them? Don't they want to get

better?

Here's something worse. Imagine that someone receives an organ transplant. Imagine

it's a kidney. A transplant typically occurs only after a long period of anxious waiting on

the part of the recipient. Only a minority of people donate organs when they die (and

even fewer when they are still alive). Only a small number of donated organs are a good

match for any hopeful recipient. This means that the typical kidney transplantee has been

undergoing dialysis, the only alternative, for years. Dialysis involves passing all the

patient's blood out of his or her body, through a machine, and back in. It is an unlikely

and miraculous treatment, so that's all good, but it's not pleasant. It must happen five to

seven times a week, for eight hours a time. It should happen every time the patient

sleeps. That's too much. No one wants to stay on dialysis.

Now, one of the complications of transplantation is rejection. Your body does not like it

when parts of someone else's body are stitched into it. Your immune system will attack

and destroy such foreign elements, even when they are crucial to your survival. To stop

this from happening, you must take anti-rejection drugs, which weaken immunity,

increasing your susceptibility to infectious disease. Most people are happy to accept the

trade-off. Recipients of transplants still suffer the effects of organ rejection, despite the

existence and utility of these drugs. It's not because the drugs fail (although they

sometimes do). It's more often because those prescribed the drugs do not take them. This

beggars belief. It is seriously not good to have your kidneys fail. Dialysis is no picnic.

Transplantation surgery occurs after long waiting, at high risk and great expense. To lose

all that because you don't take your medication? How could people do that to

themselves? How could this possibly be?

It's complicated, to be fair. Many people who receive a transplanted organ are isolated,

or beset by multiple physical health problems (to say nothing of problems associated with

unemployment or family crisis). They may be cognitively impaired or depressed. They

may not entirely trust their doctor, or understand the necessity of the medication. Maybe

they can barely afford the drugs, and ration them, desperately and unproductively.

But—and this is the amazing thing—imagine that it isn't you who feels sick. It's your

dog. So, you take him to the vet. The vet gives you a prescription. What happens then?

You have just as many reasons to distrust a vet as a doctor. Furthermore, if you cared so

little for your pet that you weren't concerned with what improper, substandard or error-

ridden prescription he might be given, you wouldn't have taken him to the vet in the first

place. Thus, you care. Your actions prove it. In fact, on average, you care *more*. People are

better at filling and properly administering prescription medication to their pets than to

themselves. That's not good. Even from your pet's perspective, it's not good. Your pet

(probably) loves you, and would be happier if you took your medication.

It is difficult to conclude anything from this set of facts except that people appear to

love their dogs, cats, ferrets and birds (and maybe even their lizards) more than

themselves. How horrible is that? How much shame must exist, for something like that

to be true? What could it be about people that makes them prefer their pets to

themselves?

It was an ancient story in the Book of Genesis—the first book in the Old Testament—

that helped me find an answer to that perplexing question.

The Oldest Story and the Nature of the World

Two stories of Creation from two different Middle Eastern sources appear to be woven

together in the Genesis account. In the chronologically first but historically more recent

account—known as the “Priestly”—God created the cosmos, using His divine Word,

speaking light, water and land into existence, following that with the plants and the

heavenly bodies. Then He created birds and animals and fish (again, employing speech)—

and ended with man, male and female, both somehow formed in his image. That all

happens in Genesis 1. In the second, older, “Jawhist” version, we find another origin

account, involving Adam and Eve (where the details of creation differ somewhat), as well

as the stories of Cain and Abel, Noah and the Tower of Babel. That is Genesis 2 to 11. To

understand Genesis 1, the Priestly story, with its insistence on speech as the fundamental

creative force, it is first necessary to review a few fundamental, ancient assumptions

(these are markedly different in type and intent from the assumptions of science, which

are, historically speaking, quite novel).

Scientific truths were made explicit a mere five hundred years ago, with the work of

Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Isaac Newton. In whatever manner our forebears

viewed the world prior to that, it was not through a scientific lens (any more than they

could view the moon and the stars through the glass lenses of the equally recent

telescope). Because we are so scientific now—and so determinedly materialistic—it is

very difficult for us even to understand that other ways of seeing can and do exist. But

those who existed during the distant time in which the foundational epics of our culture

emerged were much more concerned with the actions that dictated survival (and with

interpreting the world in a manner commensurate with that goal) than with anything

approximating what we now understand as objective truth.

Before the dawn of the scientific worldview, reality was construed differently. Being

was understood as a place of action, not a place of things.31 It was understood as

something more akin to story or drama. That story or drama was lived, subjective

experience, as it manifested itself moment to moment in the consciousness of every living

person. It was something similar to the stories we tell each other about our lives and their

personal significance; something similar to the happenings that novelists describe when

they capture existence in the pages of their books. Subjective experience—that includes

familiar objects such as trees and clouds, primarily objective in their existence, but also

(and more importantly) such things as emotions and dreams as well as hunger, thirst and

pain. It is such things, experienced personally, that are the most fundamental elements of

human life, from the archaic, dramatic perspective, and they are not easily reducible to

the detached and objective—even by the modern reductionist, materialist mind. Take

pain, for example—subjective pain. That's something so real no argument can stand

against it. Everyone acts as if their pain is real—ultimately, finally real. Pain matters,

more than matter matters. It is for this reason, I believe, that so many of the world's

traditions regard the suffering attendant upon existence as the irreducible truth of Being.

In any case, *that which we subjectively experience* can be likened much more to a novel or a

movie than to a scientific description of physical reality. It is the drama of lived

experience—the unique, tragic, personal death of your father, compared to the objective

death listed in the hospital records; the pain of your first love; the despair of dashed

hopes; the joy attendant upon a child's success.

The Domain, Not of Matter, but of What Matters

The scientific world of matter can be reduced, in some sense, to its fundamental

constituent elements: molecules, atoms, even quarks. However, the world of experience

has primal constituents, as well. These are the necessary elements whose interactions

define drama and fiction. One of these is chaos. Another is order. The third (as there are

three) is the process that mediates between the two, which appears identical to what

modern people call consciousness. It is our eternal subjugation to the first two that makes

us doubt the validity of existence—that makes us throw up our hands in despair, and fail

to care for ourselves properly. It is proper understanding of the third that allows us the

only real way out.

Chaos is the domain of ignorance itself. It's *unexplored territory*. Chaos is what extends,

eternally and without limit, beyond the boundaries of all states, all ideas, and all

disciplines. It's the foreigner, the stranger, the member of another gang, the rustle in the

bushes in the night-time, the monster under the bed, the hidden anger of your mother,

and the sickness of your child. Chaos is the despair and horror you feel when you have

been profoundly betrayed. It's the place you end up when things fall apart; when your

dreams die, your career collapses, or your marriage ends. It's the underworld of fairytale

and myth, where the dragon and the gold it guards eternally co-exist. Chaos is where we

are when we don't know where we are, and what we are doing when we don't know what

we are doing. It is, in short, all those things and situations we neither know nor

understand.

Chaos is also the formless potential from which the God of Genesis 1 called forth order

using language at the beginning of time. It's the same potential from which we, made in

that Image, call forth the novel and ever-changing moments of our lives. And Chaos is

freedom, dreadful freedom, too.

Order, by contrast, is *explored territory*. That's the hundreds-of-millions-of-years-old

hierarchy of place, position and authority. That's the structure of society. It's the

structure provided by biology, too—particularly insofar as you are adapted, as you are, to

the structure of society. Order is tribe, religion, hearth, home and country. It's the warm,

secure living-room where the fireplace glows and the children play. It's the flag of the

nation. It's the value of the currency. Order is the floor beneath your feet, and your plan

for the day. It's the greatness of tradition, the rows of desks in a school classroom, the

trains that leave on time, the calendar, and the clock. Order is the public façade we're

called upon to wear, the politeness of a gathering of civilized strangers, and the thin ice

on which we all skate. Order is the place where the behavior of the world matches our

expectations and our desires; the place where all things turn out the way we want them

to. But order is sometimes tyranny and stultification, as well, when the demand for

certainty and uniformity and purity becomes too one-sided.

Where everything is certain, we're in order. We're there when things are going

according to plan and nothing is new and disturbing. In the domain of order, things

behave as God intended. We like to be there. Familiar environments are congenial. In

order, we're able to think about things in the long term. There, things work, and we're

stable, calm and competent. We seldom leave places we understand—geographical or

conceptual—for that reason, and we certainly do not like it when we are compelled to or

when it happens accidentally.

You're in order, when you have a loyal friend, a trustworthy ally. When the same

person betrays you, sells you out, you move from the daytime world of clarity and light to

the dark underworld of chaos, confusion and despair. That's the same move you make,

and the same place you visit, when the company you work starts to fail and your job is

placed in doubt. When your tax return has been filed, that's order. When you're audited,

that’s chaos. Most people would rather be mugged than audited. Before the Twin Towers

fell—that was order. Chaos manifested itself afterward. Everyone felt it. The very air

became uncertain. What exactly was it that fell? Wrong question. What exactly remained

standing? That was the issue at hand.

When the ice you’re skating on is solid, that’s order. When the bottom drops out, and

things fall apart, and you plunge through the ice, that’s chaos. Order is the Shire of

Tolkien’s hobbits: peaceful, productive and safely inhabitable, even by the naive. Chaos is

the underground kingdom of the dwarves, usurped by Smaug, the treasure-hoarding

serpent. Chaos is the deep ocean bottom to which Pinocchio voyaged to rescue his father

from Monstro, whale and fire-breathing dragon. That journey into darkness and rescue is

the most difficult thing a puppet must do, if he wants to be real; if he wants to extract

himself from the temptations of deceit and acting and victimization and impulsive

pleasure and totalitarian subjugation; if he wants to take his place as a genuine Being in

the world.

Order is the stability of your marriage. It's buttressed by the traditions of the past and

by your expectations—grounded, often invisibly, in those traditions. Chaos is that

stability crumbling under your feet when you discover your partner's infidelity. Chaos is

the experience of reeling unbound and unsupported through space when your guiding

routines and traditions collapse.

Order is the place and time where the oft-invisible axioms you live by organize your

experience and your actions so that what should happen does happen. Chaos is the new

place and time that emerges when tragedy strikes suddenly, or malevolence reveals its

paralyzing visage, even in the confines of your own home. Something unexpected or

undesired can always make its appearance, when a plan is being laid out, regardless of

how familiar the circumstances. When that happens, the territory has shifted. Make no

mistake about it: the space, the apparent space, may be the same. But we live in time, as

well as space. In consequence, even the oldest and most familiar places retain an

ineradicable capacity to surprise you. You may be cruising happily down the road in the

automobile you have known and loved for years. But time is passing. The brakes could

fail. You might be walking down the road in the body you have always relied on. If your

heart malfunctions, even momentarily, everything changes. Friendly old dogs can still

bite. Old and trusted friends can still deceive. New ideas can destroy old and comfortable

certainties. Such things matter. They're real.

Our brains respond instantly when chaos appears, with simple, hyper-fast circuits

maintained from the ancient days, when our ancestors dwelled in trees, and snakes struck

in a flash.32 After that nigh-instantaneous, deeply reflexive bodily response comes the

later-evolving, more complex but slower responses of emotions—and, after that, comes

thinking, of the higher order, which can extend over seconds, minutes or years. All that

response is instinctive, in some sense—but the faster the response, the more instinctive.

Chaos and Order: Personality, Female and Male

Chaos and order are two of the most fundamental elements of lived experience—two of

the most basic subdivisions of Being itself. But they're not things, or objects, and they're

not experienced as such. Things or objects are part of the objective world. They're

inanimate; spiritless. They're dead. This is not true of chaos and order. Those are

perceived, experienced and understood (to the degree that they are understood at all) as

personalities—and that is just as true of the perceptions, experiences and understanding

of modern people as their ancient forebears. It's just that moderners don't notice.

Order and chaos are not understood first, objectively (as things or objects), and *then*

personified. That would only be the case if we perceived objective reality *first*, and *then*

inferred intent and purpose. But that isn't how perception operates, despite our

preconceptions. Perception of things as tools, for example, occurs before or in concert

with perception of things as objects. We see what things mean just as fast or faster than

we see what they are. 33 Perception of things as entities with personality also occurs before

perception of things as things. This is particularly true of the action of others, 34 living others, but we also see the non-living "objective world" as animated, with purpose and

intent. This is because of the operation of what psychologists have called "the hyperactive

agency detector" within us.35 We evolved, over millennia, within intensely social

circumstances. This means that the most significant elements of our environment of

origin were personalities, not things, objects or situations.

The personalities we have evolved to perceive have been around, in predictable form,

and in typical, hierarchical configurations, forever, for all intents and purposes. They have

been male or female, for example, for a billion years. That's a long time. The division of

life into its twin sexes occurred before the evolution of multi-cellular animals. It was in a

still-respectable one-fifth of that time that mammals, who take extensive care of their

young, emerged. Thus, the category of "parent" and/or "child" has been around for 200

million years. That's longer than birds have existed. That's longer than flowers have

grown. It's not a billion years, but it's still a very long time. It's plenty long enough for

male and female and parent and child to serve as vital and fundamental parts of the

environment to which we have adapted. This means that male and female and parent and

child are categories, for us—natural categories, deeply embedded in our perceptual,

emotional and motivational structures.

Our brains are deeply social. Other creatures (particularly, other humans) were

crucially important to us as we lived, mated and evolved. Those creatures were literally

our natural habitat—our environment. From a Darwinian perspective, nature —reality

itself; the environment, itself—is *what selects*. The environment cannot be defined in any

more fundamental manner. It is not mere inert matter. Reality itself is whatever we

contend with when we are striving to survive and reproduce. A lot of that is other beings,

their opinions of us, and their communities. And that's that.

Over the millennia, as our brain capacity increased and we developed curiosity to spare,

we became increasingly aware of and curious about the nature of the world —what we

eventually conceptualized as the objective world—outside the personalities of family and

troupe. And “outside” is not merely unexplored physical territory. *Outside* is outside of

what we currently understand—and understanding is *dealing with* and *coping with* and not

merely *representing objectively*. But our brains had been long concentrating on other people.

Thus, it appears that we first began to perceive the unknown, chaotic, non-human world

with the innate categories of our social brain.[36] And even this is a misstatement: when we

first began to perceive the unknown, chaotic, non-animal world, we used categories that

had originally evolved to represent the *pre-human animal social world*. Our minds are far

older than mere humanity. Our categories are far older than our species. Our most basic

category—as old, in some sense, as the sexual act itself—appears to be that of sex, male

and female. We appear to have taken that primordial knowledge of structured, creative

opposition and begun to interpret everything through its lens.[37]

Order, the known, appears symbolically associated with masculinity (as illustrated in

the aforementioned *yang* of the Taoist yin-yang symbol). This is perhaps because the

primary hierarchical structure of human society is masculine, as it is among most

animals, including the chimpanzees who are our closest genetic and, arguably,

behavioural match. It is because men are and throughout history have been the builders

of towns and cities, the engineers, stonemasons, bricklayers, and lumberjacks, the

operators of heavy machinery.38 Order is God the Father, the eternal Judge, ledger-keeper

and dispenser of rewards and punishments. Order is the peacetime army of policemen

and soldiers. It's the political culture, the corporate environment, and the system. It's the

"they" in "you know what they say." It's credit cards, classrooms, supermarket checkout

lineups, turn-taking, traffic lights, and the familiar routes of daily commuters. Order,

when pushed too far, when imbalanced, can also manifest itself destructively and terribly.

It does so as the forced migration, the concentration camp, and the soul-devouring

uniformity of the goose-step.

Chaos—the unknown—is symbolically associated with the feminine. This is partly

because all the things we have come to know were born, originally, of the unknown, just

as all beings we encounter were born of mothers. Chaos is *mater*, origin, source, mother;

materia, the substance from which all things are made. It is also *what matters*, or *what is the*

matter—the very subject matter of thought and communication. In its positive guise,

chaos is possibility itself, the source of ideas, the mysterious realm of gestation and birth.

As a negative force, it's the impenetrable darkness of a cave and the accident by the side

of the road. It's the mother grizzly, all compassion to her cubs, who marks you as

potential predator and tears you to pieces.

Chaos, the eternal feminine, is also the crushing force of sexual selection. Women are

choosy maters (unlike female chimps, their closest animal counterparts[39]). Most men do

not meet female human standards. It is for this reason that women on dating sites rate 85

percent of men as below average in attractiveness.[40] It is for this reason that we all have

twice as many female ancestors as male (imagine that all the women who have ever lived

have averaged one child. Now imagine that half the men who have ever lived have

fathered two children, if they had any, while the other half fathered none).41 It is Woman

as Nature who looks at half of all men and says, “No!” For the men, that’s a direct

encounter with chaos, and it occurs with devastating force every time they are turned

down for a date. Human female choosiness is also why we are very different from the

common ancestor we shared with our chimpanzee cousins, while the latter are very much

the same. Women’s proclivity to say no, more than any other force, has shaped our

evolution into the creative, industrious, upright, large-brained (competitive, aggressive,

domineering) creatures that we are.42 It is Nature as Woman who says, “Well, bucko,

you’re good enough for a friend, but my experience of you so far has not indicated the

suitability of your genetic material for continued propagation.”

The most profound religious symbols rely for their power in large part on this

underlying fundamentally bipartisan conceptual subdivision. The Star of David is, for

example, the downward pointing triangle of femininity and the upward pointing triangle

of the male. **fn1** It's the same for the *yoni* and *lingam* of Hinduism (which come covered with snakes, our ancient adversaries and provocateurs: the Shiva Linga is depicted with

47

snake deities called the Nagas). The ancient Egyptians represented Osiris, god of the

state, and Isis, goddess of the underworld, as twin cobras with their tails knotted

together. The same symbol was used in China to portray Fuxi and Nuwa, creators of

humanity and of writing. The representations in Christianity are less abstract, more like

personalities, but the familiar Western images of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child

and the Pietà both express the female/male dual unity, as does the traditional insistence

on the androgyny of Christ.43

It should also be noted, finally, that the structure of the brain itself at a gross

morphological level appears to reflect this duality. This, to me, indicates the fundamental,

beyond-the-metaphorical reality of this symbolically feminine/masculine divide, since the

brain is adapted, by definition, to reality itself (that is, reality conceptualized in this

quasi-Darwinian manner). Elkhonon Goldberg, student of the great Russian

neuropsychologist Alexander Luria, has proposed quite lucidly and directly that the very

hemispheric structure of the cortex reflects the fundamental division between novelty

(the unknown, or chaos) and routinization (the known, order).44 He doesn't make

reference to the symbols representing the structure of the world in reference to this

theory, but that's all the better: an idea is more credible when it emerges as a

consequence of investigations in different realms. 45

We already know all this, but we don't know we know it. But we immediately

comprehend it when it's articulated in a manner such as this. Everyone understands order

and chaos, world and underworld, when it's explained using these terms. We all have a

palpable sense of the chaos lurking under everything familiar. That's why we understand

the strange, surreal stories of *Pinocchio*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Lion King*, and *The*

Little Mermaid, and *Beauty and the Beast*, with their eternal landscapes of known and

unknown, world and underworld. We've all been in both places, many times: sometimes

by happenstance, sometimes by choice.

Many things begin to fall into place when you begin to consciously understand the

world in this manner. It's as if the knowledge of your body and soul falls into alignment

with the knowledge of your intellect. And there's more: such knowledge is proscriptive,

as well as descriptive. This is the kind of knowing *what* that helps you know *how*. This is

the kind of *is* from which you can derive an *ought*. The Taoist juxtaposition of yin and

yang, for example, doesn't simply portray chaos and order as the fundamental elements of

Being—it also tells you how to act. The Way, the Taoist path of life, is represented by (or

exists on) the border between the twin serpents. The Way is the path of proper Being. It's

the same Way as that referred to by Christ in John 14:6: *I am the way, and the truth and the*

life. The same idea is expressed in Matthew 7:14: *Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the*

way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

We eternally inhabit order, surrounded by chaos. We eternally occupy known territory,

surrounded by the unknown. We experience meaningful engagement when we mediate

appropriately between them. We are adapted, in the deepest Darwinian sense, not to the

world of objects, but to the meta-realities of order and chaos, yang and yin. Chaos and

order make up the eternal, transcendent environment of the living.

To straddle that fundamental duality is to be balanced: to have one foot firmly planted

in order and security, and the other in chaos, possibility, growth and adventure. When life

suddenly reveals itself as intense, gripping and meaningful; when time passes and you're

so engrossed in what you're doing you don't notice—it is there and then that you are

located precisely on the border between order and chaos. The subjective meaning that we

encounter there is the reaction of our deepest being, our neurologically and evolutionarily

grounded instinctive self, indicating that we are ensuring the stability but also the

expansion of habitable, productive territory, of space that is personal, social and natural.

It's the right place to be, in every sense. You are there when—and where—it matters.

48

That's what music is telling you, too, when you're listening—even more, perhaps, when

you’re dancing—when its harmonious layered patterns of predictability and

unpredictability make meaning itself well up from the most profound depths of your

Being.

Chaos and order are fundamental elements because every lived situation (even every

conceivable lived situation) is made up of both. No matter where we are, there are some

things we can identify, make use of, and predict, and some things we neither know nor

understand. No matter who we are, Kalahari Desert–dweller or Wall Street banker, some

things are under our control, and some things are not. That’s why both can understand

the same stories, and dwell within the confines of the same eternal truths. Finally, the

fundamental reality of chaos and order is true for everything alive, not only for us. Living

things are always to be found in places they can master, surrounded by things and

situations that make them vulnerable.

Order is not enough. You can’t just be stable, and secure, and unchanging, because

there are still vital and important new things to be learned. Nonetheless, chaos can be too

much. You can't long tolerate being swamped and overwhelmed beyond your capacity to

cope while you are learning what you still need to know. Thus, you need to place one foot

in what you have mastered and understood and the other in what you are currently

exploring and mastering. Then you have positioned yourself where the terror of existence

is under control and you are secure, but where you are also alert and engaged. That is

where there is something new to master and some way that you can be improved. That is

where meaning is to be found.

The Garden of Eden

Remember, as discussed earlier, that the Genesis stories were amalgamated from several

sources. After the newer Priestly story (Genesis 1), recounting the emergence of order

from chaos, comes the second, even more ancient, "Jahwist" part, beginning, essentially,

with Genesis 2. The Jahwist account, which uses the name YHWH or Jahweh to represent

God, contains the story of Adam and Eve, along with a much fuller explication of the

events of the sixth day alluded to in the previous "Priestly" story. The continuity between

the stories appears to be the result of careful editing by the person or persons known

singly to biblical scholars as the “Redactor,” who wove the stories together. This may

have occurred when the peoples of two traditions united, for one reason or another, and

the subsequent illogic of their melded stories, growing together over time in an ungainly

fashion, bothered someone conscious, courageous, and obsessed with coherence.

According to the Jahwist creation story, God first created a bounded space, known as

Eden (which, in Aramaic—Jesus’s putative language—means well-watered place) or

Paradise (*pairidaeza* in old Iranian or Avestan, which means walled or protected enclosure

or garden). God placed Adam in there, along with all manner of fruit-bearing trees, two of

which were marked out. One of these was the Tree of Life; the other, the Tree of

Knowledge of Good and Evil. God then told Adam to have his fill of fruit, as he wished,

but added that the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was forbidden.

After that, He created Eve as a partner for Adam. **fn2**

Adam and Eve don't seem very conscious, at the beginning, when they are first placed

in Paradise, and they were certainly not self-conscious. As the story insists, the original

parents were naked, but not ashamed. Such phrasing implies first that it's perfectly

natural and normal for people to be ashamed of their nakedness (otherwise nothing

would have to be said about its absence) and second that there was something amiss, for

better or worse, with our first parents. Although there are exceptions, the only people

around now who would be unashamed if suddenly dropped naked into a public place—

excepting the odd exhibitionist—are those younger than three years of age. In fact, a

common nightmare involves the sudden appearance of the dreamer, naked, on a stage in

front of a packed house.

In the third verse of Genesis, a serpent appears—first, apparently, in legged form. God

only knows why He allowed—or placed—such a creature in the garden. I have long

puzzled over the meaning of this. It seems to be a reflection, in part, of the order/chaos

dichotomy characterizing all of experience, with Paradise serving as habitable order and

the serpent playing the role of chaos. The serpent in Eden therefore means the same thing

as the black dot in the yin side of the Taoist yin/yang symbol of totality—that is, the

possibility of the unknown and revolutionary suddenly manifesting itself where

everything appears calm.

It just does not appear possible, even for God himself, to make a bounded space

completely protected from the outside—not in the real world, with its necessary

limitations, surrounded by the transcendent. The outside, chaos, always sneaks into the

inside, because nothing can be completely walled off from the rest of reality. So even the

ultimate in safe spaces inevitably harbours a snake. There were—forever—genuine,

quotidian, reptilian snakes in the grass and in the trees of our original African paradise.[46]

Even had all of those been banished, however (in some inconceivable manner, by some

primordial St. George) snakes would have still remained in the form of our primordial

human rivals (at least when they were acting like enemies, from our limited, in-group,

kin-bonded perspectives). There was, after all, no shortage of conflict and warfare among

our ancestors, tribal and otherwise. [47]

And even if we had defeated all the snakes that beset us from without, reptilian and

human alike, we would still not have been safe. Nor are we now. We have seen the

enemy, after all, and he is us. The snake inhabits each of our souls. This is the reason, as

far as I can tell, for the strange Christian insistence, made most explicit by John Milton,

that the snake in the Garden of Eden was also Satan, the Spirit of Evil itself. The

importance of this symbolic identification—its staggering brilliance—can hardly be

overstated. It is through such millennia-long exercise of the imagination that the idea of

abstracted moral concepts themselves, with all they entail, developed. Work beyond

comprehension was invested into the idea of Good and Evil, and its surrounding, dream-

like metaphor. *The worst of all possible snakes is the eternal human proclivity for evil*. The worst

of all possible snakes is *psychological, spiritual, personal, internal*. No walls, however tall, will

keep that out. Even if the fortress were thick enough, in principle, to keep everything bad

whatsoever outside, it would immediately appear again within. As the great Russian

writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn insisted, the line dividing good and evil cuts through the

heart of every human being.[48]

There is simply no way to wall off some isolated portion of the greater surrounding

reality and make everything permanently predictable and safe within it. Some of what has

been no-matter-how-carefully excluded will always sneak back in. A serpent,

metaphorically speaking, will inevitably appear. Even the most assiduous of parents

cannot fully protect their children, even if they lock them in the basement, safely away

from drugs, alcohol and internet porn. In that extreme case, the too-cautious, too-caring

parent merely substitutes him or herself for the other terrible problems of life. This is the

great Freudian Oedipal nightmare.[49] *It is far better to render Beings in your care competent than*

to protect them.

And even if it were possible to permanently banish everything threatening—everything

dangerous (and, therefore, everything challenging and interesting), that would mean only

that another danger would emerge: that of permanent human infantilism and absolute

uselessness. How could the nature of man ever reach its full potential without challenge

and danger? How dull and contemptible would we become if there was no longer reason

to pay attention? Maybe God thought His new creation would be able to handle the

serpent, and considered its presence the lesser of two evils.

Question for parents: do you want to make your children safe, or strong?

In any case, there's a serpent in the Garden, and he's a "subtil" beast, according to the

ancient story (difficult to see, vaporous, cunning, deceitful and treacherous). It therefore

comes as no surprise when he decides to play a trick on Eve. Why Eve, instead of Adam?

It could just be chance. It was fifty-fifty for Eve, statistically speaking, and those are pretty

high odds. But I have learned that these old stories contain nothing superfluous.

Anything accidental—anything that does not serve the plot—has long been forgotten in

the telling. As the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov advised, “If there is a rifle hanging

on the wall in act one, it must be fired in the next act. Otherwise it has no business being

there.” 50 Perhaps primordial Eve had more reason to attend to serpents than Adam.

Maybe they were more likely, for example, to prey on her tree-dwelling infants. Perhaps it

is for this reason that Eve’s daughters are more protective, self-conscious, fearful and

nervous, to this day (even, and especially, in the most egalitarian of modern human

societies51). In any case, the serpent tells Eve that if she eats the forbidden fruit, she won’t die. Instead, her eyes will be opened. She will become like God, knowing good from

evil. Of course, the serpent doesn’t let her know she will be like God in only that one way.

But he is a serpent, after all. Being human, and wanting to know more, Eve decides to eat

the fruit. Poof! She wakes up: she’s conscious, or perhaps self-conscious, for the first

time.

Now, no clear-seeing, conscious woman is going to tolerate an unawakened man. So,

Eve immediately shares the fruit with Adam. That makes *him* self-conscious. Little has

changed. Women have been making men self-conscious since the beginning of time. They

do this primarily by rejecting them—but they also do it by shaming them, if men do not

take responsibility. Since women bear the primary burden of reproduction, it's no

wonder. It is very hard to see how it could be otherwise. But the capacity of women to

shame men and render them self-conscious is still a primal force of nature.

Now, you may ask: what in the world have snakes got to do with vision? Well, first, it's

clearly of some importance to *see* them, because they might prey on you (particularly

when you're little and live in trees, like our arboreal ancestors). Dr. Lynn Isbell, professor

of anthropology and animal behaviour at the University of California, has suggested that

the stunningly acute vision almost uniquely possessed by human beings was an

adaptation forced on us tens of millions of years ago by the necessity of detecting and

avoiding the terrible danger of snakes, with whom our ancestors co-evolved. [52] This is

perhaps one of the reasons the snake features in the garden of Paradise as the creature

who gave us the vision of God (in addition to serving as the primordial and eternal enemy

of mankind). This is perhaps one of the reasons why Mary, the eternal, archetypal mother

—Eve perfected—is so commonly shown in medieval and Renaissance iconography

holding the Christ Child in the air, as far away as possible from a predatory reptile, which

she has firmly pinned under her foot. 53 And there's more. It's fruit that the snake offers,

and fruit is also associated with a transformation of vision, in that our ability to see color

is an adaptation that allows us to rapidly detect the ripe and therefore edible bounty of

trees.54

Our primordial parents hearkened to the snake. They ate the fruit. Their eyes opened.

They both awoke. You might think, as Eve did initially, that this would be a good thing.

Sometimes, however, half a gift is worse than none. Adam and Eve wake up, all right, but

only enough to discover some terrible things. First, they notice that they're naked.

The Naked Ape

51

My son figured out that he was naked well before he was three. He wanted to dress

himself. He kept the washroom door firmly shut. He didn't appear in public without his

clothes. I couldn't for the life of me see how this had anything to do with his upbringing.

It was his own discovery, his own realization, and his own choice of reactions. It looked

built in, to me.

What does it mean to know yourself naked—or, potentially worse, to know yourself

and your partner naked? All manner of terrible things—expressed in the rather horrifying

manner, for example, of the Renaissance painter Hans Baldung Grien, whose painting

inspired the illustration that begins this chapter. Naked means vulnerable and easily

damaged. Naked means subject to judgment for beauty and health. Naked means

unprotected and unarmed in the jungle of nature and man. This is why Adam and Eve

became ashamed, immediately after their eyes were opened. They could see—and what

they first saw was themselves. Their faults stood out. Their vulnerability was on display.

Unlike other mammals, whose delicate abdomens are protected by the armour-like

expanse of their backs, they were upright creatures, with the most vulnerable parts of

their body presented to the world. And worse was to come. Adam and Eve made

themselves loincloths (in the International Standard Version; aprons in the King James

Version) right away, to cover up their fragile bodies—and to protect their egos. Then they

promptly skittered off and hid. In their vulnerability, now fully realized, they felt

unworthy to stand before God.

If you can't identify with that sentiment, you're just not thinking. Beauty shames the

ugly. Strength shames the weak. Death shames the living—and the Ideal shames us all.

Thus we fear it, resent it—even hate it (and, of course, that's the theme next examined in

Genesis, in the story of Cain and Abel). What are we to do about that? Abandon all ideals

of beauty, health, brilliance and strength? That's not a good solution. That would merely

ensure that we would feel ashamed, all the time—and that we would even more justly

deserve it. I don't want women who can stun by their mere presence to disappear just so

that others can feel unselfconscious. I don't want intellects such as John von Neumann's

to vanish, just because of my barely-grade-twelve grasp of mathematics. By the time he

was nineteen, he had redefined numbers. 55 Numbers! Thank God for John von Neumann!

Thank God for Grace Kelly and Anita Ekberg and Monica Bellucci! I'm proud to feel

unworthy in the presence of people like that. It's the price we all pay for aim, achievement

and ambition. But it's also no wonder that Adam and Eve covered themselves up.

The next part of the story is downright farcical, in my opinion, although it's also tragic

and terrible. That evening, when Eden cools down, God goes out for His evening stroll.

But Adam is absent. This puzzles God, who is accustomed to walking with him. "Adam,"

calls God, apparently forgetting that He can see through bushes, "Where are you?" Adam

immediately reveals himself, but badly: first as a neurotic; then, as a ratfink. The creator

of all the universe calls, and Adam replies: "I heard you, God. But I was naked, and hid."

What does this mean? It means that people, unsettled by their vulnerability, eternally fear

to tell the truth, to mediate between chaos and order, and to manifest their destiny. In

other words, they are afraid to walk with God. That's not particularly admirable, perhaps,

but it's certainly understandable. God's a judgmental father. His standards are high. He's

hard to please.

God says, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat something you weren't

supposed to?" And Adam, in his wretchedness, points right at Eve, his love, his partner,

his soul-mate, and snitches on her. And then he blames God. He says, "The woman,

whom you gave to me, she gave it to me (and then I ate it)." How pathetic—and how

accurate. The first woman made the first man self-conscious and resentful. Then the first

man blamed the woman. And then the first man blamed God. This is exactly how every

spurned male feels, to this day. First, he feels small, in front of the potential object of his

love, after she denigrates his reproductive suitability. Then he curses God for making her

so bitchy, himself so useless (if he has any sense) and Being itself so deeply flawed. Then

he turns to thoughts of revenge. How thoroughly contemptible (and how utterly

understandable). At least the woman had the serpent to blame, and it later turns out that

snake is Satan himself, unlikely as that seems. Thus, we can understand and sympathize

with Eve's error. She was deceived by the best. But Adam! No one forced his words from

his mouth.

Unfortunately, the worst isn't over—for Man or Beast. First, God curses the serpent,

telling him that he will now have to slither around, legless, forever in peril of being

stomped on by angry humans. Second, He tells the woman that she will now bring forth

children in sorrow, and desire an unworthy, sometimes resentful man, who will in

consequence lord her biological fate over her, permanently. What might this mean? It

could just mean that God is a patriarchal tyrant, as politically motivated interpretations of

the ancient story insist. I think it's—merely descriptive. Merely. And here is why: As

human beings evolved, the brains that eventually gave rise to self-consciousness expanded

tremendously. This produced an evolutionary arms race between fetal head and female

pelvis.[56] The female graciously widened her hips, almost to the point where running

would no longer be possible. The baby, for his part, allowed himself to be born more than

a year early, compared to other mammals of his size, and evolved a semi-collapsible

head.[57] This was and is a painful adjustment for both. The essentially fetal baby is almost

completely dependent on his mother for everything during that first year. The

programmability of his massive brain means that he must be trained until he is eighteen

(or thirty) before being pushed out of the nest. This is to say nothing of the woman's

consequential pain in childbirth, and high risk of death for mother and infant alike. This

all means that women pay a high price for pregnancy and child-rearing, particularly in the

early stages, and that one of the inevitable consequences is increased dependence upon

the sometimes unreliable and always problematic good graces of men.

After God tells Eve what is going to happen, now that she has awakened, He turns to

Adam—who, along with his male descendants, doesn't get off any easier. God says

something akin to this: "Man, because you attended to the woman, your eyes have been

opened. Your godlike vision, granted to you by snake, fruit and lover, allows you to see

far, even into the future. But those who see into the future can also eternally see trouble

coming, and must then prepare for all contingencies and possibilities. To do that, you will

have to eternally sacrifice the present for the future. You must put aside pleasure for

security. In short: you will have to work. And it's going to be difficult. I hope you're fond

of thorns and thistles, because you're going to grow a lot of them."

And then God banishes the first man and the first woman from Paradise, out of infancy,

out of the unconscious animal world, into the horrors of history itself. And then He puts

cherubim and a flaming sword at the gate of Eden, just to stop them from eating the Fruit

of the Tree of Life. That, in particular, appears rather mean-spirited. Why not just make

the poor humans immortal, right away? Particularly if that is your plan for the ultimate

future, anyway, as the story goes? But who would dare to question God?

Perhaps Heaven is something you must build, and immortality something you must

earn.

And so we return to our original query: Why would someone buy prescription

medication for his dog, and then so carefully administer it, when he would not do the

same for himself? Now you have the answer, derived from one of the foundational texts

of mankind. Why should anyone take care of anything as naked, ugly, ashamed,

frightened, worthless, cowardly, resentful, defensive and accusatory as a descendant of

Adam? Even if that thing, that being, is himself? And I do not mean at all to exclude

women with this phrasing.

53

All the reasons we have discussed so far for taking a dim view of humanity are

applicable to others, as much as to the self. They’re generalizations about human nature;

nothing more specific. But you know so much more about yourself. You're bad enough, as

other people know you. But only you know the full range of your secret transgressions,

insufficiencies and inadequacies. No one is more familiar than you with all the ways your

mind and body are flawed. No one has more reason to hold you in contempt, to see you

as pathetic—and by withholding something that might do you good, you can punish

yourself for all your failings. A dog, a harmless, innocent, unselfconscious dog, is clearly

more deserving.

But if you are not yet convinced, let us consider another vital issue. Order, chaos, life,

death, sin, vision, work and suffering: that is not enough for the authors of Genesis, nor

for humanity itself. The story continues, in all its catastrophe and tragedy, and the people

involved (that's us) must contend with yet another painful awakening. We are next fated

to contemplate morality itself.

Good and Evil

When their eyes are opened, Adam and Eve realize more than just their nakedness and

the necessity of toil. They also come to know Good and Evil (the serpent says, referring to

the fruit, “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be

opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”). What could that possibly

mean? What could be left to explore and relate, after the vast ground already covered?

Well, simple context indicates that it must have something to do with gardens, snakes,

disobedience, fruit, sexuality and nakedness. It was the last item—nakedness —that finally

clued me in. It took years.

Dogs are predators. So are cats. They kill things and eat them. It’s not pretty. But we’ll

take them as pets and care for them, and give them their medication when they’re sick,

regardless. Why? They’re predators, but it’s just their nature. They do not bear

responsibility for it. They’re hungry, not evil. They don’t have the presence of mind, the

creativity—and, above all, the self-consciousness—necessary for the inspired cruelty of

man.

Why not? It’s simple. Unlike us, predators have no comprehension of their

fundamental weakness, their fundamental vulnerability, their own subjugation to pain

and death. But we know exactly how and where we can be hurt, and why. That is as good

a definition as any of self-consciousness. We are aware of our own defencelessness,

finitude and mortality. We can feel pain, and self-disgust, and shame, and horror, and we

know it. We know what makes us suffer. We know how dread and pain can be inflicted

on us—and that means we know exactly how to inflict it on others. We know how we are

naked, and how that nakedness can be exploited—and that means we know how others

are naked, and how they can be exploited.

We can terrify other people, consciously. We can hurt and humiliate them for faults we

understand only too well. We can torture them—literally—slowly, artfully and terribly.

That's far more than predation. That's a qualitative shift in understanding. That's a

cataclysm as large as the development of self-consciousness itself. That's the entry of the

knowledge of Good and Evil into the world. That's a second as-yet-unhealed fracture in

the structure of Existence. That's the transformation of Being itself into a moral

endeavour—all attendant on the development of sophisticated self-consciousness.

Only man could conceive of the rack, the iron maiden and the thumbscrew. Only man

will inflict suffering for the sake of suffering. That is the best definition of evil I have been

able to formulate. Animals can't manage that, but humans, with their excruciating, semi-

divine capacities, most certainly can. And with this realization we have well-nigh full

legitimization of the idea, very unpopular in modern intellectual circles, of Original Sin.

And who would dare to say that there was no element of voluntary choice in our

evolutionary, individual and theological transformation? Our ancestors chose their sexual

partners, and they selected for—consciousness? And self-consciousness? And moral

knowledge? And who can deny the sense of existential guilt that pervades human

experience? And who could avoid noting that without that guilt—that sense of inbuilt

corruption and capacity for wrongdoing—a man is one step from psychopathy?

Human beings have a great capacity for wrongdoing. It's an attribute that is unique in

the world of life. We can and do make things worse, voluntarily, with full knowledge of

what we are doing (as well as accidentally, and carelessly, and in a manner that is willfully

blind). Given that terrible capacity, that proclivity for malevolent actions, is it any wonder

we have a hard time taking care of ourselves, or others—or even that we doubt the value

of the entire human enterprise? And we've suspected ourselves, for good reason, for a

very long time. Thousands of years ago, the ancient Mesopotamians believed, for

example, that mankind itself was made from the blood of Kingu, the single most terrible

monster that the great Goddess of Chaos could produce, in her most vengeful and

destructive moments.58 After drawing conclusions such as that, how could we not

question the value of our being, and even of Being itself? Who then could be faced with

illness, in himself or another, without doubting the moral utility of prescribing a healing

medicament? And no one understands the darkness of the individual better than the

individual himself. Who, then, when ill, is going to be fully committed to his own care?

Perhaps Man is something that should never have been. Perhaps the world should even

be cleansed of all human presence, so that Being and consciousness could return to the

innocent brutality of the animal. I believe that the person who claims never to have

wished for such a thing has neither consulted his memory nor confronted his darkest

fantasies.

What then is to be done?

A Spark of the Divine

In Genesis 1, God creates the world with the divine, truthful Word, generating habitable,

paradisal order from the precosmogonic chaos. He then creates Man and Woman in His

Image, imbuing them with the capacity to do the same—to create order from chaos, and

continue His work. At each stage of creation, including that involving the formation of

the first couple, God reflects upon what has come to be, and pronounces it Good.

The juxtaposition of Genesis 1 with Genesis 2 & 3 (the latter two chapters outlining

the fall of man, describing why our lot is so tragedy-ridden and ethically torturous)

produces a narrative sequence almost unbearable in its profundity. The moral of Genesis

1 is that Being brought into existence through true speech is Good. This is true even of

man himself, prior to his separation from God. This goodness is terribly disrupted by the

events of the fall (and of Cain and Abel and the Flood and the Tower of Babel), but we

retain an intimation of the prelapsarian state. We remember, so to speak. We remain

eternally nostalgic for the innocence of childhood, the divine, unconscious Being of the

animal, and the untouched cathedral-like old-growth forest. We find respite in such

things. We worship them, even if we are self-proclaimed atheistic environmentalists of

the most anti-human sort. The original state of Nature, conceived in this manner, is

paradisal. But we are no longer one with God and Nature, and there is no simple turning

back.

The original Man and Woman, existing in unbroken unity with their Creator, did not

appear conscious (and certainly not self-conscious). Their eyes were not open. But, in

their perfection, they were also less, not more, than their post-Fall counterparts. Their

goodness was something bestowed, rather than deserved or earned. They exercised no

choice. God knows, that's easier. But maybe it's not better than, for example, goodness

genuinely earned. Maybe, even in some cosmic sense (assuming that consciousness itself

is a phenomenon of cosmic significance), free choice matters. Who can speak with

certainty about such things? I am unwilling to take these questions off the table, however,

merely because they are difficult. So, here's a proposition: perhaps it is not simply the

emergence of self-consciousness and the rise of our moral knowledge of Death and the

Fall that besets us and makes us doubt our own worth. Perhaps it is instead our

unwillingness—reflected in Adam's shamed hiding—to walk with God, despite our

fragility and propensity for evil.

The entire Bible is structured so that everything after the Fall—the history of Israel, the

prophets, the coming of Christ—is presented as a remedy for that Fall, a way out of evil.

The beginning of conscious history, the rise of the state and all its pathologies of pride

and rigidity, the emergence of great moral figures who try to set things right, culminating

in the Messiah Himself—that is all part of humanity's attempt, God willing, to set itself

right. And what would that mean?

And this is an amazing thing: the answer is already implicit in Genesis 1: to embody the

Image of God—to speak out of chaos the Being that is Good—but to do so consciously, of

our own free choice. *Back* is the way forward—as T. S. Eliot so rightly insisted—but back

as awake beings, exercising the proper choice of awake beings, instead of back to sleep:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Through the unknown, remembered gate

When the last of earth left to discover

Is that which was the beginning;

At the source of the longest river

The voice of the hidden waterfall

And the children in the apple-tree

Not known, because not looked for

But heard, half-heard, in the stillness

Between two waves of the sea.

Quick now, here, now, always—

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

And all shall be well and

All manner of things shall be well

When the tongues of flames are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one.

("Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*, 1943)

If we wish to take care of ourselves properly, we would have to respect ourselves—but we

don't, because we are—not least in our own eyes—fallen creatures. If we lived in Truth; if

we spoke the Truth—then we could walk with God once again, and respect ourselves, and

others, and the world. Then we might treat ourselves like people we cared for. We might

strive to set the world straight. We might orient it toward Heaven, where we would want

people we cared for to dwell, instead of Hell, where our resentment and hatred would

eternally sentence everyone.

In the areas where Christianity emerged two thousand years ago, people were much

more barbaric than they are today. Conflict was everywhere. Human sacrifice, including

that of children, was a common occurrence even in technologically sophisticated societies,

such as that of ancient Carthage.[59] In Rome, arena sports were competitions to the death,

and the spilling of blood was a commonplace. The probability that a modern person, in a

functional democratic country, will now kill or be killed is infinitesimally low compared to

what it was in previous societies (and still is, in the unorganized and anarchic parts of the

world).[60] Then, the primary moral issue confronting society was control of violent,

impulsive selfishness and the mindless greed and brutality that accompanies it. People

with those aggressive tendencies still exist. At least now they know that such behaviour is

sub-optimal, and either try to control it or encounter major social obstacles if they don't.

But now, also, another problem has arisen, which was perhaps less common in our

harsher past. It is easy to believe that people are arrogant, and egotistical, and always

looking out for themselves. The cynicism that makes that opinion a universal truism is

widespread and fashionable. But such an orientation to the world is not at all

characteristic of many people. They have the opposite problem: they shoulder intolerable

burdens of self-disgust, self-contempt, shame and self-consciousness. Thus, instead of

narcissistically inflating their own importance, they don't value themselves at all, and they

don't take care of themselves with attention and skill. It seems that people often don't

really believe that they deserve the best care, personally speaking. They are excruciatingly

aware of their own faults and inadequacies, real and exaggerated, and ashamed and

doubtful of their own value. They believe that other people shouldn't suffer, and they will

work diligently and altruistically to help them alleviate it. They extend the same courtesy

even to the animals they are acquainted with—but not so easily to themselves.

It is true that the idea of virtuous self-sacrifice is deeply embedded in Western culture

(at least insofar as the West has been influenced by Christianity, which is based on the

imitation of someone who performed the ultimate act of self-sacrifice). Any claim that the

Golden Rule does not mean "sacrifice yourself for others" might therefore appear

dubious. But Christ's archetypal death exists as an example of how to accept finitude,

betrayal and tyranny heroically—how to walk with God despite the tragedy of self-

conscious knowledge—and not as a directive to victimize ourselves in the service of

others. To sacrifice ourselves to God (to the highest good, if you like) does not mean to

suffer silently and willingly when some person or organization demands more from us,

consistently, than is offered in return. That means we are supporting tyranny, and

allowing ourselves to be treated like slaves. It is not virtuous to be victimized by a bully,

even if that bully is oneself.

I learned two very important lessons from Carl Jung, the famous Swiss depth

psychologist, about “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you” or “loving

your neighbour as yourself.” The first lesson was that neither of these statements has

anything to do with being nice. The second was that both are equations, rather than

injunctions. If I am someone’s friend, family member, or lover, then I am morally obliged

to bargain as hard on my own behalf as they are on theirs. If I fail to do so, I will end up a

slave, and the other person a tyrant. What good is that? It much better for any

relationship when both partners are strong. Furthermore, there is little difference

between standing up and speaking for yourself, when you are being bullied or otherwise

tormented and enslaved, and standing up and speaking for someone else. As Jung points

out, this means embracing and loving the sinner who is yourself, as much as forgiving and

aiding someone else who is stumbling and imperfect.

As God himself claims (so goes the story), “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the

Lord.” According to this philosophy, you do not simply belong to yourself. You are not

simply your own possession to torture and mistreat. This is partly because your Being is

inexorably tied up with that of others, and your mistreatment of yourself can have

catastrophic consequences for others. This is most clearly evident, perhaps, in the

aftermath of suicide, when those left behind are often both bereft and traumatized. But,

metaphorically speaking, there is also this: you have a spark of the divine in you, which

belongs not to you, but to God. We are, after all—according to Genesis—made in His

image. We have the semi-divine capacity for consciousness. Our consciousness

participates in the speaking forth of Being. We are low-resolution (“kenotic”) versions of

God. We can make order from chaos—and vice versa—in our way, with our words. So, we

may not exactly be God, but we’re not exactly nothing, either.

In my own periods of darkness, in the underworld of the soul, I find myself frequently

overcome and amazed by the ability of people to befriend each other, to love their

intimate partners and parents and children, and to do what they must do to keep the

machinery of the world running. I knew a man, injured and disabled by a car accident,

who was employed by a local utility. For years after the crash he worked side by side with

another man, who for his part suffered with a degenerative neurological disease. They

cooperated while repairing the lines, each making up for the other's inadequacy. This sort

of everyday heroism is the rule, I believe, rather than the exception. Most individuals are

dealing with one or more serious health problems while going productively and

uncomplainingly about their business. If anyone is fortunate enough to be in a rare period

of grace and health, personally, then he or she typically has at least one close family

member in crisis. Yet people prevail and continue to do difficult and effortful tasks to

hold themselves and their families and society together. To me this is miraculous—so

much so that a dumbfounded gratitude is the only appropriate response. There are so

many ways that things can fall apart, or fail to work altogether, and it is always wounded

people who are holding it together. They deserve some genuine and heartfelt admiration

for that. It's an ongoing miracle of fortitude and perseverance.

In my clinical practice I encourage people to credit themselves and those around them

for acting productively and with care, as well as for the genuine concern and

thoughtfulness they manifest towards others. People are so tortured by the limitations

and constraint of Being that I am amazed they ever act properly or look beyond

themselves at all. But enough do so that we have central heat and running water and

infinite computational power and electricity and enough for everyone to eat and even the

capacity to contemplate the fate of broader society and nature, terrible nature, itself. All

that complex machinery that protects us from freezing and starving and dying from lack

of water tends unceasingly towards malfunction through entropy, and it is only the

constant attention of careful people that keeps it working so unbelievably well. Some

people degenerate into the hell of resentment and the hatred of Being, but most refuse to

do so, despite their suffering and disappointments and losses and inadequacies and

ugliness, and again that is a miracle for those with the eyes to see it.

Humanity, in toto, and those who compose it as identifiable people deserve some

sympathy for the appalling burden under which the human individual genuinely staggers;

some sympathy for subjugation to mortal vulnerability, tyranny of the state, and the

depredations of nature. It is an existential situation that no mere animal encounters or

endures, and one of severity such that it would take a God to fully bear it. It is this

sympathy that should be the proper medicament for self-conscious self-contempt, which

has its justification, but is only half the full and proper story. Hatred for self and mankind

must be balanced with gratefulness for tradition and the state and astonishment at what

normal, everyday people accomplish—to say nothing of the staggering achievements of

the truly remarkable.

We deserve some respect. You deserve some respect. You are important to other

people, as much as to yourself. You have some vital role to play in the unfolding destiny

of the world. You are, therefore, morally obliged to take care of yourself. You should take

care of, help and be good to yourself the same way you would take care of, help and be

good to someone you loved and valued. You may therefore have to conduct yourself

habitually in a manner that allows you some respect for your own Being—and fair

enough. But every person is deeply flawed. Everyone falls short of the glory of God. If that

stark fact meant, however, that we had no responsibility to care, for ourselves as much as

others, everyone would be brutally punished all the time. That would not be good. That

would make the shortcomings of the world, which can make everyone who thinks

honestly question the very propriety of the world, worse in every way. That simply cannot

be the proper path forward.

To treat yourself as if you were someone you are responsible for helping is, instead, to

consider what would be truly good for you. This is not “what you want.” It is also not

“what would make you happy.” Every time you give a child something sweet, you make

that child happy. That does not mean that you should do nothing for children except feed

them candy. “Happy” is by no means synonymous with “good.” You must get children to

brush their teeth. They must put on their snowsuits when they go outside in the cold,

even though they might object strenuously. You must help a child become a virtuous,

responsible, awake being, capable of full reciprocity—able to take care of himself and

others, and to thrive while doing so. Why would you think it acceptable to do anything

less for yourself?

You need to consider the future and think, “What might my life look like if I were

caring for myself properly? What career would challenge me and render me productive

and helpful, so that I could shoulder my share of the load, and enjoy the consequences?

What should I be doing, when I have some freedom, to improve my health, expand my

knowledge, and strengthen my body?” You need to know where you are, so you can start

to chart your course. You need to know who you are, so that you understand your

armament and bolster yourself in respect to your limitations. You need to know where

you are going, so that you can limit the extent of chaos in your life, restructure order, and

bring the divine force of Hope to bear on the world.

You must determine where you are going, so that you can bargain for yourself, so that

you don't end up resentful, vengeful and cruel. You have to articulate your own

principles, so that you can defend yourself against others' taking inappropriate advantage

of you, and so that you are secure and safe while you work and play. You must discipline

yourself carefully. You must keep the promises you make to yourself, and reward yourself,

so that you can trust and motivate yourself. You need to determine how to act toward

yourself so that you are most likely to become and to stay a good person. It would be

good to make the world a better place. Heaven, after all, will not arrive of its own accord.

We will have to work to bring it about, and strengthen ourselves, so that we can

withstand the deadly angels and flaming sword of judgment that God used to bar its

entrance.

Don’t underestimate the power of vision and direction. These are irresistible forces,

able to transform what might appear to be unconquerable obstacles into traversable

pathways and expanding opportunities. Strengthen the individual. Start with yourself.

Take care with yourself. Define who you are. Refine your personality. Choose your

destination and articulate your Being. As the great nineteenth-century German

philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche so brilliantly noted, “He whose life has a why can bear

almost any how.” 61

You could help direct the world, on its careening trajectory, a bit more toward Heaven

and a bit more away from Hell. Once having understood Hell, researched it, so to speak—

particularly your own individual Hell—you could decide against going there or creating

that. You could aim elsewhere. You could, in fact, devote your life to this. That would

give you a Meaning, with a capital M. That would justify your miserable existence. That

would atone for your sinful nature, and replace your shame and self-consciousness with

the natural pride and forthright confidence of someone who has learned once again to

walk with God in the Garden.

You could begin by treating yourself as if you were someone you were responsible for

helping.

R U L E 3

MAKE FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE WHO WANT THE BEST FOR

YOU

THE OLD HOMETOWN

The town I grew up in had been scraped only fifty years earlier out of the endless flat

Northern prairie. Fairview, Alberta, was part of the frontier, and had the cowboy bars to

prove it. The Hudson's Bay Co. department store on Main Street still bought beaver, wolf

and coyote furs directly from the local trappers. Three thousand people lived there, four

hundred miles away from the nearest city. Cable TV, video games and internet did not

exist. It was no easy matter to stay innocently amused in Fairview, particularly during the

five months of winter, when long stretches of forty-below days and even colder nights

were the norm.

The world is a different place when it’s cold like that. The drunks in our town ended

their sad lives early. They passed out in snowbanks at three in the morning and froze to

death. You don’t go outside casually when it’s forty below. On first breath, the arid desert

air constricts your lungs. Ice forms on your eyelashes and they stick together. Long hair,

wet from the shower, freezes solid and then stands on end wraith-like of its own accord

later in a warm house, when it thaws bone dry, charged with electricity. Children only put

their tongues on steel playground equipment once. Smoke from house chimneys doesn’t

rise. Defeated by the cold, it drifts downwards, and collects like fog on snow-covered

rooftops and yards. Cars must be plugged in at night, their engines warmed by block

heaters, or oil will not flow through them in the morning, and they won’t start.

Sometimes they won’t anyway. Then you turn the engine over pointlessly until the starter

clatters and falls silent. Then you remove the frozen battery from the car, loosening bolts

with stiffening fingers in the intense cold, and bring it into the house. It sits there,

sweating for hours, until it warms enough to hold a decent charge. You are not going to

see out of the back window of your car, either. It frosts over in November and stays that

way until May. Scraping it off just dampens the upholstery. Then it's frozen, too. Late one

night going to visit a friend I sat for two hours on the edge of the passenger seat in a 1970

Dodge Challenger, jammed up against the stick-shift, using a vodka-soaked rag to keep

the inside of the front windshield clear in front of the driver because the car heater had

quit. Stopping wasn't an option. There was nowhere to stop.

And it was hell on house cats. Felines in Fairview had short ears and tails because they

had lost the tips of both to frostbite. They came to resemble Arctic foxes, which evolved

those features to deal proactively with the intense cold. One day our cat got outside and

no one noticed. We found him, later, fur frozen fast to the cold hard backdoor cement

steps where he sat. We carefully separated cat from concrete, with no lasting damage—

except to his pride. Fairview cats were also at great risk in the winter from cars, but not

for the reasons you think. It wasn't automobiles sliding on icy roads and running them

over. Only loser cats died that way. It was cars parked immediately after being driven that

were dangerous. A frigid cat might think highly of climbing up under such a vehicle and

sitting on its still-warm engine block. But what if the driver decided to use the car again,

before the engine cooled down and cat departed? Let's just say that heat-seeking house-

pets and rapidly rotating radiator fans do not coexist happily.

Because we were so far north, the bitterly cold winters were also very dark. By

December, the sun didn't rise until 9:30 a.m. We trudged to school in the pitch black. It

wasn't much lighter when we walked home, just before the early sunset. There wasn't

much for young people to do in Fairview, even in the summer. But the winters were

worse. Then your friends mattered. More than anything.

My Friend Chris and His Cousin

I had a friend at that time. We'll call him Chris. He was a smart guy. He read a lot. He

liked science fiction of the kind I was attracted to (Bradbury, Heinlein, Clarke). He was

inventive. He was interested in electronic kits and gears and motors. He was a natural

engineer. All this was overshadowed, however, by something that had gone wrong in his

family. I don't know what it was. His sisters were smart and his father was soft-spoken

and his mother was kind. The girls seemed OK. But Chris had been left unattended to in

some important way. Despite his intelligence and curiosity he was angry, resentful and

without hope.

All this manifested itself in material form in the shape of his 1972 blue Ford pickup

truck. That notorious vehicle had at least one dent in every quarter panel of its damaged

external body. Worse, it had an equivalent number of dents inside. Those were produced

by the impact of the body parts of friends against the internal surfaces during the

continual accidents that resulted in the outer dents. Chris's truck was the exoskeleton of

a nihilist. It had the perfect bumper sticker: *Be Alert—The World Needs More Lerts*. The

irony it produced in combination with the dents elevated it nicely to theatre of the

absurd. Very little of that was (so to speak) accidental.

Every time Chris crashed his truck, his father would fix it, and buy him something else.

He had a motorbike and a van for selling ice cream. He did not care for his motorbike. He

sold no ice cream. He often expressed dissatisfaction with his father and their

relationship. But his dad was older and unwell, diagnosed with an illness only after many

years. He didn't have the energy he should have. Maybe he couldn't pay enough attention

to his son. Maybe that's all it took to fracture their relationship.

Chris had a cousin, Ed, who was about two years younger. I liked him, as much as you

can like the younger cousin of a teenage friend. He was a tall, smart, charming, good-

looking kid. He was witty, too. You would have predicted a good future for him, had you

met him when he was twelve. But Ed drifted slowly downhill, into a dropout, semi-

drifting mode of existence. He didn't get as angry as Chris, but he was just as confused. If

you knew Ed's friends, you might say that it was peer pressure that set him on his

downward path. But his peers weren't obviously any more lost or delinquent than he was,

although they were generally somewhat less bright. It was also the case that Ed's—and

Chris's—situation did not appear particularly improved by their discovery of marijuana.

Marijuana isn't bad for everyone any more than alcohol is bad for everyone. Sometimes it

even appears to improve people. But it didn't improve Ed. It didn't improve Chris, either.

To amuse ourselves in the long nights, Chris and I and Ed and the rest of the teenagers

drove around and around in our 1970s cars and pickup trucks. We cruised down Main

Street, along Railroad Avenue, up past the high school, around the north end of town,

over to the west—or up Main Street, around the north end of town, over to the east—and

so on, endlessly repeating the theme. If we weren't driving in town, we were driving in

the countryside. A century earlier, surveyors had laid out a vast grid across the entire

three-hundred-thousand-square-mile expanse of the great western prairie. Every two

miles north, a plowed gravel road stretched forever, east to west. Every mile west, another

travelled north and south. We never ran out of roads.

Teenage Wasteland

If we weren't circling around town and countryside we were at a party. Some relatively

If we weren't circling around town and countryside we were at a party. Some relatively

young adult (or some relatively creepy older adult) would open his house to friends. It

would then become temporary home to all manner of party crashers, many of whom

started out seriously undesirable or quickly become that way when drinking. A party

might also happen accidentally, when some teenager's unwitting parents had left town. In

that case, the occupants of the cars or trucks always cruising around would notice house

lights on, but household car absent. This was not good. Things could get seriously out of

hand.

I did not like teenage parties. I do not remember them nostalgically. They were dismal

affairs. The lights were kept low. That kept self-consciousness to a minimum. The over-

loud music made conversation impossible. There was little to talk about in any case.

There were always a couple of the town psychopaths attending. Everybody drank and

smoked too much. A dreary and oppressive sense of aimlessness hung over such

occasions, and nothing ever happened (unless you count the time my too-quiet classmate

drunkenly began to brandish his fully-loaded 12-gauge shotgun, or the time the girl I later

married contemptuously insulted someone while he threatened her with a knife, or the

time another friend climbed a large tree, swung out on a branch, and crashed flat onto his

back, half dead right beside the campfire we had started at its base, followed precisely one

minute later by his halfwit sidekick).

No one knew what the hell they were doing at those parties. Hoping for a cheerleader?

Waiting for Godot? Although the former would have been immediately preferred

(although cheerleading squads were scarce in our town), the latter was closer to the

truth. It would be more romantic, I suppose, to suggest that we would have all jumped at

the chance for something more productive, bored out of our skulls as we were. But it's

not true. We were all too prematurely cynical and world-weary and leery of responsibility

to stick to the debating clubs and Air Cadets and school sports that the adults around us

tried to organize. Doing *anything* wasn't cool. I don't know what teenage life was like

before the revolutionaries of the late sixties advised everyone young to tune in, turn on

and drop out. Was it OK for a teenager to belong wholeheartedly to a club in 1955?

Because it certainly wasn't twenty years later. Plenty of us turned on and dropped out.

But not so many tuned in.

I wanted to be elsewhere. I wasn't the only one. Everyone who eventually left the

Fairview I grew up in knew they were leaving by the age of twelve. I knew. My wife, who

grew up with me on the street our families shared, knew. The friends I had who did and

didn't leave also knew, regardless of which track they were on. There was an unspoken

expectation in the families of those who were college-bound that such a thing was a

matter of course. For those from less-educated families, a future that included university

was simply not part of the conceptual realm. It wasn't for lack of money, either. Tuition

for advanced education was very low at that time, and jobs in Alberta were plentiful and

high-paying. I earned more money in 1980 working at a plywood mill than I would again

doing anything else for twenty years. No one missed out on university because of financial

need in oil-rich Alberta in the 1970s.

Some Different Friends—and Some More of the Same

In high school, after my first group of cronies had all dropped out, I made friends with a

couple of newcomers. They came to Fairview as boarders. There was no school after ninth

grade in their even more remote and aptly named hometown, Bear Canyon. They were an

ambitious duo, comparatively speaking; straightforward and reliable, but also cool and

very amusing. When I left town to attend Grande Prairie Regional College, ninety miles

away, one of them became my roommate. The other went off elsewhere to pursue further

education. Both were aiming upward. Their decisions to do so bolstered mine.

I was a happy clam when I arrived at college. I found another, expanded group of like-

minded companions, whom my Bear Canyon comrade also joined. We were all captivated

by literature and philosophy. We ran the Student Union. We made it profitable, for the

first time in its history, hosting college dances. How can you lose money selling beer to

college kids? We started a newspaper. We got to know our professors of political science

and biology and English literature in the tiny seminars that characterized even our first

year. The instructors were thankful for our enthusiasm and taught us well. We were

building a better life.

I sloughed off a lot of my past. In a small town, everyone knows who you are. You drag

your years behind you like a running dog with tin cans tied to its tail. You can't escape

who you have been. Everything wasn't online then, and thank God for that, but it was

stored equally indelibly in everyone's spoken and unspoken expectations and memory.

When you move, everything is up in the air, at least for a while. It's stressful, but in the

chaos there are new possibilities. People, including you, can't hem you in with their old

notions. You get shaken out of your ruts. You can make new, better ruts, with people

aiming at better things. I thought this was just a natural development. I thought that

every person who moved would have—and want—the same phoenix-like experience. But

that wasn't always the case.

One time, when I was about fifteen, I went with Chris and another friend, Carl, to

Edmonton, a city of six hundred thousand. Carl had never been to a city. This was not

uncommon. Fairview to Edmonton was an eight-hundred-mile round trip. I had done it

many times, sometimes with my parents, sometimes without. I liked the anonymity that

the city provided. I liked the new beginnings. I liked the escape from the dismal, cramped

adolescent culture of my home town. So, I convinced my two friends to make the journey.

But they did not have the same experience. As soon as we arrived, Chris and Carl wanted

to buy some pot. We headed for the parts of Edmonton that were exactly like the worst of

Fairview. We found the same furtive street-vending marijuana providers. We spent the

weekend drinking in the hotel room. Although we had travelled a long distance, we had

gone nowhere at all.

I saw an even more egregious example of this a few years later. I had moved to

Edmonton to finish my undergraduate degree. I took an apartment with my sister, who

was studying to be a nurse. She was also an up-and-out-of-there person. (Not too many

years later she would plant strawberries in Norway and run safaris through Africa and

smuggle trucks across the Tuareg-menaced Sahara Desert, and babysit orphan gorillas in

the Congo.) We had a nice place in a new high-rise, overlooking the broad valley of the

North Saskatchewan River. We had a view of the city skyline in the background. I bought

a beautiful new Yamaha upright piano, in a fit of enthusiasm. The place looked good.

I heard through the grapevine that Ed—Chris's younger cousin—had moved to the city.

I thought that was a good thing. One day he called. I invited him over. I wanted to see

how he was faring. I hoped he was achieving some of the potential I once saw in him.

That is not what happened. Ed showed up, older, balder and stooped. He was a lot more

not-doing-so-well young adult and a lot less youthful possibility. His eyes were the

telltale red slits of the practised stoner. Ed had had taken some job—lawn-mowing and

casual landscaping—which would have been fine for a part-time university student or for

someone who could not do better but which was wretchedly low-end as a career for an

intelligent person.

He was accompanied by a friend.

It was his friend I really remember. He was spaced. He was baked. He was stoned out of

his gourd. His head and our nice, civilized apartment did not easily occupy the same

universe. My sister was there. She knew Ed. She'd seen this sort of thing before. But I still

wasn't happy that Ed had brought this character into our place. Ed sat down. His friend

sat down, too, although it wasn't clear he noticed. It was tragicomedy. Stoned as he was,

Ed still had the sense to be embarrassed. We sipped our beer. Ed's friend looked upwards.

"My particles are scattered all over the ceiling," he managed. Truer words were never

spoken.

I took Ed aside and told him politely that he had to leave. I said that he shouldn't have

brought his useless bastard of a companion. He nodded. He understood. That made it

even worse. His older cousin Chris wrote me a letter much later about such things. I

included it in my first book, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, published in 1999:

"I had friends," he said.[62] "Before. Anyone with enough self-contempt that they could

forgive me mine."

What was it that made Chris and Carl and Ed unable (or, worse, perhaps, unwilling) to

move or to change their friendships and improve the circumstances of their lives? Was it

inevitable—a consequence of their own limitations, nascent illnesses and traumas of the

past? After all, people vary significantly, in ways that seem both structural and

deterministic. People differ in intelligence, which is in large part the ability to learn and

transform. People have very different personalities, as well. Some are active, and some

passive. Others are anxious or calm. For every individual driven to achieve, there is

another who is indolent. The degree to which these differences are immutably part and

parcel of someone is greater than an optimist might presume or desire. And then there is

illness, mental and physical, diagnosed or invisible, further limiting or shaping our lives.

Chris had a psychotic break in his thirties, after flirting with insanity for many years.

Not long afterward, he committed suicide. Did his heavy marijuana use play a magnifying

role, or was it understandable self-medication? Use of physician-prescribed drugs for pain

has, after all, decreased in marijuana-legal states such as Colorado. [63] Maybe the pot made

things better for Chris, not worse. Maybe it eased his suffering, instead of exacerbating

his instability. Was it the nihilistic philosophy he nurtured that paved the way to his

eventual breakdown? Was that nihilism, in turn, a consequence of genuine ill health, or

just an intellectual rationalization of his unwillingness to dive responsibly into life? Why

did he—like his cousin, like my other friends—continually choose people who, and places

that, were not good for him?

Sometimes, when people have a low opinion of their own worth—or, perhaps, when

they refuse responsibility for their lives—they choose a new acquaintance, of precisely the

type who proved troublesome in the past. Such people don't believe that they deserve any

better—so they don't go looking for it. Or, perhaps, they don't want the trouble of better.

Freud called this a "repetition compulsion." He thought of it as an unconscious drive to

repeat the horrors of the past—sometimes, perhaps, to formulate those horrors more

precisely, sometimes to attempt more active mastery and sometimes, perhaps, because no

alternatives beckon. People create their worlds with the tools they have directly at hand.

Faulty tools produce faulty results. Repeated use of the same faulty tools produces the

same faulty results. It is in this manner that those who fail to learn from the past doom

themselves to repeat it. It's partly fate. It's partly inability. It's partly … unwillingness to

learn? Refusal to learn? *Motivated* refusal to learn?

Rescuing the Damned

People choose friends who aren't good for them for other reasons, too. Sometimes it's

because they want to rescue someone. This is more typical of young people, although the

impetus still exists among older folks who are too agreeable or have remained naive or

who are willfully blind. Someone might object, "It is only right to see the best in people.

The highest virtue is the desire to help." But not everyone who is failing is a victim, and

not everyone at the bottom wishes to rise, although many do, and many manage it.

67

Nonetheless, people will often accept or even amplify their own suffering, as well as that

of others, if they can brandish it as evidence of the world's injustice. There is no shortage

of oppressors among the downtrodden, even if, given their lowly positions, many of them

are only tyrannical wannabes. It's the easiest path to choose, moment to moment,

although it's nothing but hell in the long run.

Imagine someone not doing well. He needs help. He might even want it. But it is not

easy to distinguish between someone truly wanting and needing help and someone who is

merely exploiting a willing helper. The distinction is difficult even for the person who is

wanting and needing and possibly exploiting. The person who tries and fails, and is

forgiven, and then tries again and fails, and is forgiven, is also too often the person who

wants everyone to believe in the authenticity of all that trying.

When it's not just naïveté, the attempt to rescue someone is often fuelled by vanity and

narcissism. Something like this is detailed in the incomparable Russian author Fyodor

Dostoevsky's bitter classic, *Notes from Underground*, which begins with these famous lines:

"I am a sick man … I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is

diseased." It is the confession of a miserable, arrogant sojourner in the underworld of

chaos and despair. He analyzes himself mercilessly, but only pays in this manner for a

hundred sins, despite committing a thousand. Then, imagining himself redeemed, the

underground man commits the worst transgression of the lot. He offers aid to a genuinely

unfortunate person, Liza, a woman on the desperate nineteenth-century road to

prostitution. He invites her for a visit, promising to set her life back on the proper course.

While waiting for her to appear, his fantasies spin increasingly messianic:

One day passed, however, another and another; she did not come and I began to grow calmer. I felt particularly

bold and cheerful after nine o'clock, I even sometimes began dreaming, and rather sweetly: I, for instance,

became the salvation of Liza, simply through her coming to me and my talking to her.… I develop her, educate

her. Finally, I notice that she loves me, loves me passionately. I pretend not to understand (I don't know,

however, why I pretend, just for effect, perhaps). At last all confusion, transfigured, trembling and sobbing, she

flings herself at my feet and says that I am her savior, and that she loves me better than anything in the world.

Nothing but the narcissism of the underground man is nourished by such fantasies.

Liza herself is demolished by them. The salvation he offers to her demands far more in

the way of commitment and maturity than the underground man is willing or able to

offer. He simply does not have the character to see it through—something he quickly

realizes, and equally quickly rationalizes. Liza eventually arrives at his shabby apartment,

hoping desperately for a way out, staking everything she has on the visit. She tells the

underground man that she wants to leave her current life. His response?

“Why have you come to me, tell me that, please?” I began, gasping for breath and regardless of logical

connection in my words. I longed to have it all out at once, at one burst; I did not even trouble how to begin.

“Why have you come? Answer, answer,” I cried, hardly knowing what I was doing. “I’ll tell you, my good girl,

why you have come. You’ve come because I talked sentimental stuff to you then. So now you are soft as butter

and longing for fine sentiments again. So you may as well know that I was laughing at you then. And I am

laughing at you now. Why are you shuddering? Yes, I was laughing at you! I had been insulted just before, at

dinner, by the fellows who came that evening before me. I came to you, meaning to thrash one of them, an

officer; but I didn’t succeed, I didn’t find him; I had to avenge the insult on someone to get back my own again;

you turned up, I vented my spleen on you and laughed at you. I had been humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate; I

had been treated like a rag, so I wanted to show my power.… That’s what it was, and you imagined I had come

there on purpose to save you. Yes? You imagined that? You imagined that?”

I knew that she would perhaps be muddled and not take it all in exactly, but I knew, too, that she would

grasp the gist of it, very well indeed. And so, indeed, she did. She turned white as a handkerchief, tried to say

something, and her lips worked painfully; but she sank on a chair as though she had been felled by an axe. And

all the time afterwards she listened to me with her lips parted and her eyes wide open, shuddering with awful

terror. The cynicism, the cynicism of my words overwhelmed her.…

The inflated self-importance, carelessness and sheer malevolence of the underground man

dashes Liza's last hopes. He understands this well. Worse: something in him was aiming

at this all along. And he knows that too. But a villain who despairs of his villainy has not

become a hero. A hero is something positive, not just the absence of evil.

But Christ himself, you might object, befriended tax-collectors and prostitutes. How

But Christ himself, you might object, befriended tax-collectors and prostitutes. How

dare I cast aspersions on the motives of those who are trying to help? But Christ was the

archetypal perfect man. And you're you. How do you know that your attempts to pull

someone up won't instead bring them—or you—further down? Imagine the case of

someone supervising an exceptional team of workers, all of them striving towards a

collectively held goal; imagine them hard-working, brilliant, creative and unified. But the

person supervising is also responsible for someone troubled, who is performing poorly,

elsewhere. In a fit of inspiration, the well-meaning manager moves that problematic

person into the midst of his stellar team, hoping to improve him by example. What

happens?—and the psychological literature is clear on this point.[64] Does the errant

interloper immediately straighten up and fly right? No. Instead, the entire team

degenerates. The newcomer remains cynical, arrogant and neurotic. He complains. He

shirks. He misses important meetings. His low-quality work causes delays, and must be

redone by others. He still gets paid, however, just like his teammates. The hard workers

who surround him start to feel betrayed. "Why am I breaking myself into pieces striving

to finish this project," each thinks, "when my new team member never breaks a sweat?"

The same thing happens when well-meaning counsellors place a delinquent teen among

comparatively civilized peers. The delinquency spreads, not the stability. [65] Down is a lot

easier than up.

Maybe you are saving someone because you're a strong, generous, well-put-together

person who wants to do the right thing. But it's also possible—and, perhaps, more likely

—that you just want to draw attention to your inexhaustible reserves of compassion and

good-will. Or maybe you're saving someone because you want to convince yourself that

the strength of your character is more than just a side effect of your luck and birthplace.

Or maybe it's because it's easier to look virtuous when standing alongside someone

utterly irresponsible.

Assume first that you are doing the easiest thing, and not the most difficult.

Your raging alcoholism makes my binge drinking appear trivial. My long serious talks

with you about your badly failing marriage convince both of us that you are doing

everything possible and that I am helping you to my utmost. It looks like effort. It looks

like progress. But real improvement would require far more from both of you. Are you so

sure the person crying out to be saved has not decided a thousand times to accept his lot

of pointless and worsening suffering, simply because it is easier than shouldering any true

responsibility? Are you enabling a delusion? Is it possible that your contempt would be

more salutary than your pity?

Or maybe you have no plan, genuine or otherwise, to rescue anybody. You're

associating with people who are bad for you not because it's better for anyone, but

because it's easier. You know it. Your friends know it. You're all bound by an implicit

contract—one aimed at nihilism, and failure, and suffering of the stupidest sort. You've

all decided to sacrifice the future to the present. You don't talk about it. You don't all get

together and say, "Let's take the easier path. Let's indulge in whatever the moment might

bring. And let’s agree, further, not to call each other on it. That way, we can more easily

forget what we are doing.” You don’t mention any of that. But you all know what’s really

going on.

Before you help someone, you should find out why that person is in trouble. You

shouldn’t merely assume that he or she is a noble victim of unjust circumstances and

exploitation. It’s the most unlikely explanation, not the most probable. In my experience

—clinical and otherwise—it’s just never been that simple. Besides, if you buy the story

that everything terrible just happened on its own, with no personal responsibility on the

part of the victim, you deny that person all agency in the past (and, by implication, in the

present and future, as well). In this manner, you strip him or her of all power.

It is far more likely that a given individual has just decided to reject the path upward,

because of its difficulty. Perhaps that should even be your default assumption, when faced

with such a situation. That’s too harsh, you think. You might be right. Maybe that’s a

step too far. But consider this: failure is easy to understand. No explanation for its

existence is required. In the same manner, fear, hatred, addiction, promiscuity, betrayal

and deception require no explanation. It's not the existence of vice, or the indulgence in

it, that requires explanation. Vice is easy. Failure is easy, too. It's easier not to shoulder a

burden. It's easier not to think, and not to do, and not to care. It's easier to put off until

tomorrow what needs to be done today, and drown the upcoming months and years in

today's cheap pleasures. As the infamous father of the Simpson clan puts it, immediately

prior to downing a jar of mayonnaise and vodka, "That's a problem for Future Homer.

Man, I don't envy that guy! [”66]

How do I know that your suffering is not the demand of martyrdom for my resources,

so that you can oh-so-momentarily stave off the inevitable? Maybe you have even moved

beyond caring about the impending collapse, but don't yet want to admit it. Maybe my

help won't rectify anything—can't rectify anything—but it does keep that too-terrible,

too-personal realization temporarily at bay. Maybe your misery is a demand placed on me

so that I fail too, so that the gap you so painfully feel between us can be reduced, while

you degenerate and sink. How do I know that you would refuse to play such a game? How

do I know that I am not myself merely pretending to be responsible, while pointlessly

"helping" you, so that *I* don't have to do something truly difficult—and genuinely

possible?

Maybe your misery is the weapon you brandish in your hatred for those who rose

upward while you waited and sank. Maybe your misery is your attempt to prove the

world's injustice, instead of the evidence of your own sin, your own missing of the mark,

your conscious refusal to strive and to live. Maybe your willingness to suffer in failure is

inexhaustible, given what you use that suffering to prove. Maybe it's your revenge on

Being. How exactly should I befriend you when you're in such a place? How exactly could

I?

Success: that's the mystery. Virtue: that's what's inexplicable. To fail, you merely have

to cultivate a few bad habits. You just have to bide your time. And once someone has

spent enough time cultivating bad habits and biding their time, they are much

diminished. Much of what they could have been has dissipated, and much of the less that

they have become is now real. Things fall apart, of their own accord, but the sins of men

speed their degeneration. And then comes the flood.

I am not saying that there is no hope of redemption. But it is much harder to extract

someone from a chasm than to lift him from a ditch. And some chasms are very deep.

And there's not much left of the body at the bottom.

Maybe I should at least wait, to help you, until it's clear that you want to be helped.

Carl Rogers, the famous humanistic psychologist, believed it was impossible to start a

therapeutic relationship if the person seeking help did not want to improve.[67] Rogers

believed it was impossible to convince someone to change for the better. The desire to

improve was, instead, the precondition for progress. I've had court-mandated

psychotherapy clients. They did not want my help. They were forced to seek it. It did not

work. It was a travesty.

If I stay in an unhealthy relationship with you, perhaps it's because I'm too weak-willed

and indecisive to leave, but I don't want to know it. Thus, I continue helping you, and

console myself with my pointless martyrdom. Maybe I can then conclude, about myself,

"Someone that self-sacrificing, that willing to help someone—that has to be a good

person." Not so. It might be just a person trying to look good pretending to solve what

appears to be a difficult problem instead of actually being good and addressing something

real.

Maybe instead of continuing our friendship I should just go off somewhere, get my act

together, and lead by example.

And none of this is a justification for abandoning those in real need to pursue your

narrow, blind ambition, in case it has to be said.

A Reciprocal Arrangement

Here's something to consider: If you have a friend whose friendship you wouldn't

recommend to your sister, or your father, or your son, why would you have such a friend

for yourself? You might say: out of loyalty. Well, loyalty is not identical to stupidity.

Loyalty must be negotiated, fairly and honestly. Friendship is a reciprocal arrangement.

You are not morally obliged to support someone who is making the world a worse place.

Quite the opposite. You should choose people who want things to be better, not worse.

It's a good thing, not a selfish thing, to choose people who are good for you. It's

appropriate and praiseworthy to associate with people whose lives would be improved if

they saw your life improve.

If you surround yourself with people who support your upward aim, they will not

tolerate your cynicism and destructiveness. They will instead encourage you when you do

good for yourself and others and punish you carefully when you do not. This will help

bolster your resolve to do what you should do, in the most appropriate and careful

manner. People who are not aiming up will do the opposite. They will offer a former

smoker a cigarette and a former alcoholic a beer. They will become jealous when you

succeed, or do something pristine. They will withdraw their presence or support, or

actively punish you for it. They will over-ride your accomplishment with a past action,

real or imaginary, of their own. Maybe they are trying to test you, to see if your resolve is

real, to see if you are genuine. But mostly they are dragging you down because your new

improvements cast their faults in an even dimmer light.

It is for this reason that every good example is a fateful challenge, and every hero, a

judge. Michelangelo's great perfect marble David cries out to its observer: "You could be

more than you are." When you dare aspire upward, you reveal the inadequacy of the

present and the promise of the future. Then you disturb others, in the depths of their

souls, where they understand that their cynicism and immobility are unjustifiable. You

play Abel to their Cain. You remind them that they ceased caring not because of life's

horrors, which are undeniable, but because they do not want to lift the world up on to

their shoulders, where it belongs.

Don’t think that it is easier to surround yourself with good healthy people than with

bad unhealthy people. It’s not. A good, healthy person is an ideal. It requires strength and

daring to stand up near such a person. Have some humility. Have some courage. Use your

judgment, and protect yourself from too-uncritical compassion and pity.

Make friends with people who want the best for you.

4/2
MIKHAILA!
4/2
JULIAN!

R U L E 4

COMPARE YOURSELF TO WHO YOU WERE YESTERDAY, NOT

TO WHO SOMEONE ELSE IS TODAY

THE INTERNAL CRITIC

It was easier for people to be good at something when more of us lived in small, rural

communities. Someone could be homecoming queen. Someone else could be spelling-bee

champ, math whiz or basketball star. There were only one or two mechanics and a couple

of teachers. In each of their domains, these local heroes had the opportunity to enjoy the

serotonin-fuelled confidence of the victor. It may be for that reason that people who were

born in small towns are statistically overrepresented among the eminent.[68] If you're one

in a million now, but originated in modern New York, there's twenty of you —and most of

us now live in cities. What's more, we have become digitally connected to the entire

seven billion. Our hierarchies of accomplishment are now dizzyingly vertical.

No matter how good you are at something, or how you rank your accomplishments,

there is someone out there who makes you look incompetent. You're a decent guitar

player, but you're not Jimmy Page or Jack White. You're almost certainly not even going

to rock your local pub. You're a good cook, but there are many great chefs. Your mother's

recipe for fish heads and rice, no matter how celebrated in her village of origin, doesn't

cut it in these days of grapefruit foam and Scotch/tobacco ice-cream. Some Mafia don has

a tackier yacht. Some obsessive CEO has a more complicated self-winding watch, kept in

his more valuable mechanical hardwood-and-steel automatic self-winding watch case.

Even the most stunning Hollywood actress eventually transforms into the Evil Queen, on

eternal, paranoid watch for the new Snow White. And you? Your career is boring and

pointless, your housekeeping skills are second-rate, your taste is appalling, you're fatter

than your friends, and everyone dreads your parties. Who cares if you are prime minister

of Canada when someone else is the president of the United States?

Inside us dwells a critical internal voice and spirit that knows all this. It's predisposed

to make its noisy case. It condemns our mediocre efforts. It can be very difficult to quell.

Worse, critics of its sort are necessary. There is no shortage of tasteless artists, tuneless

musicians, poisonous cooks, bureaucratically-personality-disordered middle managers,

hack novelists and tedious, ideology-ridden professors. Things and people differ

importantly in their qualities. Awful music torments listeners everywhere. Poorly

designed buildings crumble in earthquakes. Substandard automobiles kill their drivers

when they crash. Failure is the price we pay for standards and, because mediocrity has

consequences both real and harsh, standards are necessary.

We are not equal in ability or outcome, and never will be. A very small number of

people produce very much of everything. The winners don't take all, but they take most,

and the bottom is not a good place to be. People are unhappy at the bottom. They get sick

there, and remain unknown and unloved. They waste their lives there. They die there. In

consequence, the self-denigrating voice in the minds of people weaves a devastating tale.

Life is a zero-sum game. Worthlessness is the default condition. What but willful

blindness could possibly shelter people from such withering criticism? It is for such

reasons that a whole generation of social psychologists recommended "positive illusions"

as the only reliable route to mental health.[69] Their credo? Let a lie be your umbrella. A

more dismal, wretched, pessimistic philosophy can hardly be imagined: things are so

terrible that only delusion can save you.

Here is an alternative approach (and one that requires no illusions). If the cards are

always stacked against you, perhaps the game you are playing is somehow rigged (perhaps

by you, unbeknownst to yourself). If the internal voice makes you doubt the value of your

endeavours—or your life, or life itself—perhaps you should stop listening. If the critical

voice within says the same denigrating things about everyone, no matter how successful,

how reliable can it be? Maybe its comments are chatter, not wisdom. *There will always be*

people better than you— that's a cliché of nihilism, like the phrase, *In a million years, who's*

going to know the difference? The proper response to that statement is not, *Well, then,*

everything is meaningless. It's, *Any idiot can choose a frame of time within which nothing matters.*

Talking yourself into irrelevance is not a profound critique of Being. It's a cheap trick of

the rational mind.

Many Good Games

Standards of better or worse are not illusory or unnecessary. If you hadn't decided that

what you are doing right now was better than the alternatives, you wouldn't be doing it.

The idea of a value-free choice is a contradiction in terms. Value judgments are a

precondition for action. Furthermore, every activity, once chosen, comes with its own

internal standards of accomplishment. If something can be done at all, it can be done

better or worse. To do anything at all is therefore to play a game with a defined and

valued end, which can always be reached more or less efficiently and elegantly. Every

game comes with its chance of success or failure. Differentials in quality are omnipresent.

Furthermore, if there was no better and worse, nothing would be worth doing. There

would be no value and, therefore, no meaning. Why make an effort if it doesn't improve

anything? Meaning itself requires the difference between better and worse. How, then,

can the voice of critical self-consciousness be stilled? Where are the flaws in the

apparently impeccable logic of its message?

We might start by considering the all-too-black-and-white words themselves: "success"

or "failure." You are either a success, a comprehensive, singular, over-all good thing, or

its opposite, a failure, a comprehensive, singular, irredeemably bad thing. The words

imply no alternative and no middle ground. However, in a world as complex as ours, such

generalizations (really, such failure to differentiate) are a sign of naive, unsophisticated or

even malevolent analysis. There are vital degrees and gradations of value obliterated by

this binary system, and the consequences are not good.

To begin with, there is not just one game at which to succeed or fail. There are many

games and, more specifically, many good games—games that match your talents, involve

you productively with other people, and sustain and even improve themselves across

time. Lawyer is a good game. So is plumber, physician, carpenter, or schoolteacher. The

world allows for many ways of Being. If you don't succeed at one, you can try another.

You can pick something better matched to your unique mix of strengths, weaknesses and

situation. Furthermore, if changing games does not work, you can invent a new one. I

recently watched a talent show featuring a mime who taped his mouth shut and did

something ridiculous with oven mitts. That was unexpected. That was original. It seemed

to be working for him.

It's also unlikely that you're playing only one game. You have a career and friends and

family members and personal projects and artistic endeavors and athletic pursuits. You

might consider judging your success across all the games you play. Imagine that you are

very good at some, middling at others, and terrible at the remainder. Perhaps that's how

it should be. You might object: I should be winning at everything! But winning at

everything might only mean that you're not doing anything new or difficult. You might be

winning but you're not growing, and growing might be the most important form of

75

winning. Should victory in the present always take precedence over trajectory across

time?

Finally, you might come to realize that the specifics of the many games you are playing

are so unique to you, so individual, that comparison to others is simply inappropriate.

Perhaps you are overvaluing what you don't have and undervaluing what you do. There's

some real utility in gratitude. It's also good protection against the dangers of victimhood

and resentment. Your colleague outperforms you at work. His wife, however, is having an

affair, while your marriage is stable and happy. Who has it better? The celebrity you

admire is a chronic drunk driver and bigot. Is his life truly preferable to yours?

When the internal critic puts you down using such comparisons, here's how it operates:

First, it selects a single, arbitrary domain of comparison (fame, maybe, or power). Then it

acts as if that domain is the only one that is relevant. Then it contrasts you unfavourably

with someone truly stellar, within that domain. It can take that final step even further,

using the unbridgeable gap between you and its target of comparison as evidence for the

fundamental injustice of life. That way your motivation to do anything at all can be most

effectively undermined. Those who accept such an approach to self-evaluation certainly

can't be accused of making things too easy for themselves. But it's just as big a problem

to make things too difficult.

When we are very young we are neither individual nor informed. We have not had the

time nor gained the wisdom to develop our own standards. In consequence, we must

compare ourselves to others, because standards are necessary. Without them, there is

nowhere to go and nothing to do. As we mature we become, by contrast, increasingly

individual and unique. The conditions of our lives become more and more personal and

less and less comparable with those of others. Symbolically speaking, this means we must

leave the house ruled by our father, and confront the chaos of our individual Being. We

must take note of our disarray, without completely abandoning that father in the process.

We must then rediscover the values of our culture—veiled from us by our ignorance,

hidden in the dusty treasure-trove of the past—rescue them, and integrate them into our

own lives. This is what gives existence its full and necessary meaning.

Who are you? You think you know, but maybe you don't. You are, for example, neither

your own master, nor your own slave. You cannot easily tell yourself what to do and

compel your own obedience (any more than you can easily tell your husband, wife, son or

daughter what to do, and compel theirs). You are interested in some things and not in

others. You can shape that interest, but there are limits. Some activities will always

engage you, and others simply will not.

You have a nature. You can play the tyrant to it, but you will certainly rebel. How hard

can you force yourself to work and sustain your desire to work? How much can you

sacrifice to your partner before generosity turns to resentment? What is it that you

actually love? What is it that you genuinely want? Before you can articulate your own

standards of value, you must see yourself as a stranger—and then you must get to know

yourself. What do you find valuable or pleasurable? How much leisure, enjoyment, and

reward do you require, so that you feel like more than a beast of burden? How must you

treat yourself, so you won't kick over the traces and smash up your corral? You could

force yourself through your daily grind and kick your dog in frustration when you come

home. You could watch the precious days tick by. Or you could learn how to entice

yourself into sustainable, productive activity. Do you ask yourself what you want? Do you

negotiate fairly with yourself? Or are you a tyrant, with yourself as slave?

When do you dislike your parents, your spouse, or your children, and why? What might

be done about that? What do you need and want from your friends and your business

partners? This is not a mere matter of what you *should* want. I'm not talking about what

other people require from you, or your duties to them. I'm talking about determining the

nature of your moral obligation, to yourself. *Should* might enter into it, because you are

nested within a network of social obligations. *Should* is your responsibility, and you

should live up to it. But this does not mean you must take the role of lap-dog, obedient

and harmless. That's how a dictator wants his slaves.

Dare, instead, to be dangerous. Dare to be truthful. Dare to articulate yourself, and

express (or at least become aware of) what would really justify your life. If you allowed

your dark and unspoken desires for your partner, for example, to manifest themselves—if

you were even willing to consider them—you might discover that they were not so dark,

given the light of day. You might discover, instead, that you were just afraid and, so,

pretending to be moral. You might find that getting what you actually desire would stop

you from being tempted and straying. Are you so sure that your partner would be

unhappy if more of you rose to the surface? The femme fatale and the anti-hero are

sexually attractive for a reason.…

How do you need to be spoken to? What do you need to take from people? What are

you putting up with, or pretending to like, from duty or obligation? Consult your

resentment. It's a revelatory emotion, for all its pathology. It's part of an evil triad:

arrogance, deceit, and resentment. Nothing causes more harm than this underworld

Trinity. But resentment always means one of two things. Either the resentful person is

immature, in which case he or she should shut up, quit whining, and get on with it, or

there is tyranny afoot—in which case the person subjugated has a moral obligation to

speak up. Why? Because the consequence of remaining silent is worse. Of course, it's

easier in the moment to stay silent and avoid conflict. But in the long term, that's deadly.

When you have something to say, silence is a lie—and tyranny feeds on lies. When should

you push back against oppression, despite the danger? When you start nursing secret

fantasies of revenge; when your life is being poisoned and your imagination fills with the

wish to devour and destroy.

I had a client decades ago who suffered from severe obsessive-compulsive disorder. He

had to line up his pyjamas just right before he could go to sleep at night. Then he had to

fluff his pillow. Then he had to adjust the bedsheets. Over and over and over and over. I

said, “Maybe that part of you, that insanely persistent part, wants something, inarticulate

though it may be. Let it have its say. What could it be?” He said, “Control.” I said, “Close

your eyes and let it tell you what it wants. Don’t let fear stop you. You don’t have to act it

out, just because you’re thinking it.” He said, “It wants me to take my stepfather by the

collar, put him up against the door, and shake him like a rat.” Maybe it was time to shake

someone like a rat, although I suggested something a bit less primal. But God only knows

what battles must be fought, forthrightly, voluntarily, on the road to peace. What do you

do to avoid conflict, necessary though it may be? What are you inclined to lie about,

assuming that the truth might be intolerable? What do you fake?

The infant is dependent on his parents for almost everything he needs. The child—the

successful child—can leave his parents, at least temporarily, and make friends. He gives

up a little of himself to do that, but gains much in return. The successful adolescent must

take that process to its logical conclusion. He has to leave his parents and become like

everyone else. He has to integrate with the group so he can transcend his childhood

dependency. Once integrated, the successful adult then must learn how to be just the

right amount different from everyone else.

Be cautious when you're comparing yourself to others. You're a singular being, once

you're an adult. You have your own particular, specific problems—financial, intimate,

psychological, and otherwise. Those are embedded in the unique broader context of your

existence. Your career or job works for you in a personal manner, or it does not, and it

does so in a unique interplay with the other specifics of your life. You must decide how

much of your time to spend on this, and how much on that. You must decide what to let

go, and what to pursue.

The Point of Our Eyes (or, Take Stock)

Our eyes are always pointing at things we are interested in approaching, or investigating,

or looking for, or having. We must see, but to see, we must aim, so we are always aiming.

Our minds are built on the hunting-and-gathering platforms of our bodies. To hunt is to

specify a target, track it, and throw at it. To gather is to specify and to grasp. We fling

stones, and spears, and boomerangs. We toss balls through hoops, and hit pucks into

nets, and curl carved granite rocks down the ice onto horizontal bull's-eyes. We launch

projectiles at targets with bows, guns, rifles and rockets. We hurl insults, launch plans,

and pitch ideas. We succeed when we score a goal or hit a target. We fail, or sin, when we

do not (as the word *sin* means to miss the mark70). We cannot navigate, without

something to aim at and, while we are in this world, we must always navigate.71

We are always and simultaneously *at* point "a" (which is less desirable than it could

be), *moving towards* point "b" (which we deem better, in accordance with our explicit and

implicit values). We always encounter the world in a state of insufficiency and seek its

correction. We can imagine new ways that things could be set right, and improved, even if

we have everything we thought we needed. Even when satisfied, temporarily, we remain

curious. We live within a framework that defines the present as eternally lacking and the

future as eternally better. If we did not see things this way, we would not act at all. We

wouldn't even be able to see, because to see we must focus, and to focus we must pick

one thing above all else on which to focus.

But we can see. We can even see things that aren't there. We can envision new ways

that things could be better. We can construct new, hypothetical worlds, where problems

we weren't even aware of can now show themselves and be addressed. The advantages of

this are obvious: we can change the world so that the intolerable state of the present can

be rectified in the future. The disadvantage to all this foresight and creativity is chronic

unease and discomfort. Because we always contrast what is with what could be, we have

to aim at what could be. But we can aim too high. Or too low. Or too chaotically. So we

fail and live in disappointment, even when we appear to others to be living well. How can

we benefit from our imaginativeness, our ability to improve the future, without

continually denigrating our current, insufficiently successful and worthless lives?

The first step, perhaps, is to take stock. Who are you? When you buy a house and

prepare to live in it, you hire an inspector to list all its faults—as it is, in reality, now, not

as you wish it could be. You'll even pay him for the bad news. You need to know. You

need to discover the home's hidden flaws. You need to know whether they are cosmetic

imperfections or structural inadequacies. You need to know because you can't fix

something if you don't know it's broken—and you're broken. You need an inspector. The

internal critic—it could play that role, if you could get it on track; if you and it could

cooperate. It could help you take stock. But you must walk through your psychological

house with it and listen judiciously to what it says. Maybe you're a handy-man's dream, a

real fixer-upper. How can you start your renovations without being demoralized, even

crushed, by your internal critic's lengthy and painful report of your inadequacies?

Here's a hint. The future is like the past. But there's a crucial difference. The past is

fixed, but the future—it could be better. It could be better, some precise amount—the

amount that can be achieved, perhaps, in a day, with some minimal engagement. The

present is eternally flawed. But where you start might not be as important as the direction

you are heading. *Perhaps happiness is always to be found in the journey uphill, and not in the*

fleeting sense of satisfaction awaiting at the next peak. Much of happiness is hope, no matter

how deep the underworld in which that hope was conceived.

Called upon properly, the internal critic will suggest something to set in order, which

you *could* set in order, which you *would* set in order—voluntarily, without resentment,

even with pleasure. Ask yourself: is there one thing that exists in disarray in your life or

your situation that you could, and would, set straight? Could you, and would you, fix that

one thing that announces itself humbly in need of repair? Could you do it now? Imagine

that you are someone with whom you must negotiate. Imagine further that you are lazy,

touchy, resentful and hard to get along with. With that attitude, it's not going to be easy

to get you moving. You might have to use a little charm and playfulness. "Excuse me,"

you might say to yourself, without irony or sarcasm. "I'm trying to reduce some of the

unnecessary suffering around here. I could use some help." Keep the derision at bay. "I'm

wondering if there is anything that you would be willing to do? I'd be very grateful for

your service." Ask honestly and with humility. That's no simple matter.

You might have to negotiate further, depending on your state of mind. Maybe you don't

trust yourself. You think that you'll ask yourself for one thing and, having delivered,

immediately demand more. And you'll be punitive and hurtful about it. And you'll

denigrate what was already offered. Who wants to work for a tyrant like that? Not you.

That's why you don't do what you want yourself to do. You're a bad employee—but a

worse boss. Maybe you need to say to yourself, "OK. I know we haven't gotten along very

well in the past. I'm sorry about that. I'm trying to improve. I'll probably make some

more mistakes along the way, but I'll try to listen if you object. I'll try to learn. I noticed,

just now, today, that you weren't really jumping at the opportunity to help when I asked.

Is there something I could offer in return for your cooperation? Maybe if you did the

dishes, we could go for coffee. You like espresso. How about an espresso—maybe a

double shot? Or is there something else you want?" Then you could listen. Maybe you'll

hear a voice inside (maybe it's even the voice of a long-lost child). Maybe it will reply,

"Really? You really want to do something nice for me? You'll really do it? It's not a

trick?"

This is where you must be careful.

That little voice—that's the voice of someone once burnt and twice shy. So, you could

say, very carefully, "Really. I might not do it very well, and I might not be great company,

but I will do something nice for you. I promise." A little careful kindness goes a long way,

and judicious reward is a powerful motivator. Then you could take that small bit of

yourself by the hand and do the damn dishes. And then you better not go clean the

bathroom and forget about the coffee or the movie or the beer or it will be even harder to

call those forgotten parts of yourself forth from the nooks and crannies of the underworld.

You might ask yourself, “What could I say to someone else—my friend, my brother, my

boss, my assistant—that would set things a bit more right between us tomorrow? What

bit of chaos might I eradicate at home, on my desk, in my kitchen, tonight, so that the

stage could be set for a better play? What snakes might I banish from my closet—and my

mind?” Five hundred small decisions, five hundred tiny actions, compose your day, today,

and every day. Could you aim one or two of these at a better result? Better, in your own

private opinion, by your own individual standards? Could you compare your specific

personal tomorrow with your specific personal yesterday? Could you use your own

judgment, and ask yourself what that better tomorrow might be?

Aim small. You don’t want to shoulder too much to begin with, given your limited

talents, tendency to deceive, burden of resentment, and ability to shirk responsibility.

Thus, you set the following goal: by the end of the day, I want things in my life to be a

tiny bit better than they were this morning. Then you ask yourself, “What could I do, that

I would do, that would accomplish that, and what small thing would I like as a reward?”

Then you do what you have decided to do, even if you do it badly. Then you give yourself

that damn coffee, in triumph. Maybe you feel a bit stupid about it, but you do it anyway.

And you do the same thing tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. And, with each

day, your baseline of comparison gets a little higher, and that’s magic. That’s compound

interest. Do that for three years, and your life will be entirely different. Now you’re

aiming for something higher. Now you’re wishing on a star. Now the beam is

disappearing from your eye, and you’re learning to see. And what you aim at determines

what you see. That’s worth repeating. *What you aim at determines what you see.*

What You Want and What You See

The dependency of sight on aim (and, therefore, on value—because you aim at what you

value) was demonstrated unforgettably by the cognitive psychologist Daniel Simons more

than fifteen years ago.[72] Simons was investigating something called "sustained

inattentional blindness." He would sit his research subjects in front of a video monitor

and show them, for example, a field of wheat. Then he would transform the photo slowly,

secretly, while they watched. He would slowly fade in a road cutting through the wheat.

He didn't insert some little easy-to-miss footpath, either. It was a major trail, occupying a

good third of the image. Remarkably, the observers would frequently fail to take notice.

The demonstration that made Dr. Simons famous was of the same kind, but more

dramatic—even unbelievable. First, he produced a video of two teams of three people. [73]

One team was wearing white shirts, the other, black. (The two teams were not off in the

distance, either, or in any way difficult to see. The six of them filled much of the video

screen, and their facial features were close enough to see clearly.) Each team had its own

ball, which they bounced or threw to their other team members, as they moved and

feinted in the small space in front of the elevators where the game was filmed. Once Dan

had his video, he showed it to his study participants. He asked each of them to count the

number of times the white shirts threw the ball back and forth to one another. After a few

minutes, his subjects were asked to report the number of passes. Most answered “15.”

That was the correct answer. Most felt pretty good about that. Ha! They passed the test!

But then Dr. Simons asked, “Did you see the gorilla?”

Was this a joke? What gorilla?

So, he said, “Watch the video again. But this time, don’t count.” Sure enough, a minute

or so in, a man dressed in a gorilla suit waltzes right into the middle of the game for a few

long seconds, stops, and then beats his chest in the manner of stereotyped gorillas

everywhere. Right in the middle of the screen. Large as life. Painfully and irrefutably

evident. But one out of every two of his research subjects missed it, the first time they

saw the video. It gets worse. Dr. Simons did another study. This time, he showed his

subjects a video of someone being served at a counter. The server dips behind the counter

to retrieve something, and pops back up. So what? Most of his participants don't detect

anything amiss. But it was a different person who stood up in the original server's place!

"No way," you think. "I'd notice." But it's "yes way." There's a high probability you

wouldn't detect the change, even if the gender or race of the person is switched at the

same time. You're blind too.

This is partly because vision is expensive—psychophysiologically expensive;

neurologically expensive. Very little of your retina is high-resolution fovea —the very

central, high-resolution part of the eye, used to do such things as identify faces. Each of

the scarce foveal cells needs 10,000 cells in the visual cortex merely to manage the first

part of the multi-stage processing of seeing. 74 Then each of those 10,000 requires 10,000

more just to get to stage two. If all your retina was fovea you would require the skull of a

B-movie alien to house your brain. In consequence, we triage, when we see. Most of our

vision is peripheral, and low resolution. We save the fovea for things of importance. We

point our high-resolution capacities at the few specific things we are aiming at. And we

let everything else—which is almost everything—fade, unnoticed, into the background.

If something you're not attending to pops its ugly head up in a manner that directly

interferes with your narrowly focused current activity, you will see it. Otherwise, it's just

not there. The ball on which Simons's research subjects were focused was never obscured

by the gorilla or by any of the six players. Because of that—because the gorilla did not

interfere with the ongoing, narrowly defined task—it was indistinguishable from

everything else the participants didn't see, when they were looking at that ball. The big

ape could be safely ignored. That's how you deal with the overwhelming complexity of

the world: you ignore it, while you concentrate minutely on your private concerns. You

see things that facilitate your movement forward, toward your desired goals. You detect

obstacles, when they pop up in your path. You're blind to everything else (and there's a

lot of everything else—so you're very blind). And it has to be that way, because there is

much more of the world than there is of you. You must shepherd your limited resources

carefully. Seeing is very difficult, so you must choose what to see, and let the rest go.

There's a profound idea in the ancient Vedic texts (the oldest scriptures of Hinduism,

and part of the bedrock of Indian culture): the world, as perceived, is *maya*—appearance or

illusion. This means, in part, that people are blinded by their desires (as well as merely

incapable of seeing things as they truly are). This is true, in a sense that transcends the

metaphorical. Your eyes are tools. They are there to help you get what you want. The

price you pay for that utility, that specific, focused direction, is blindness to everything

else. This doesn't matter so much when things are going well, and we are getting what we

want (although it can be a problem, even then, because getting what we currently want

can make blind us to higher callings). But all that ignored world presents a truly terrible

problem when we're in crisis, and nothing whatsoever is turning out the way we want it

to. Then, there can be far too much to deal with. Happily, however, that problem contains

within it the seeds of its own solution. Since you've ignored so much, there is plenty of

possibility left where you have not yet looked.

Imagine that you're unhappy. You're not getting what you need. Perversely, this may be

because of what you want. You are blind, because of what you desire. Perhaps what you

really need is right in front of your eyes, but you cannot see it because of what you are

currently aiming for. And that brings us to something else: the price that must be paid

before you, or anyone, can get what they want (or, better yet, what they need). Think

about it this way. You look at the world in your particular, idiosyncratic manner. You use

a set of tools to screen most things out and let some things in. You have spent a lot of

time building those tools. They've become habitual. They're not mere abstract thoughts.

They're built right into you. They orient you in the world. They're your deepest and often

implicit and unconscious values. They've become part of your biological structure.

They're alive. And they don't want to disappear, or transform, or die. But sometimes their

time has come, and new things need to be born. For this reason (although not only for

this reason) it is necessary to let things go during the journey uphill. If things are not

going well for you—well, that might be because, as the most cynical of aphorisms has it,

life sucks, and then you die. Before your crisis impels you to that hideous conclusion,

however, you might consider the following: *life doesn't have the problem. You do.* At least

that realization leaves you with some options. If your life is not going well, perhaps it is

your current knowledge that is insufficient, not life itself. Perhaps your value structure

needs some serious retooling. Perhaps what you want is blinding you to what else could

be. Perhaps you are holding on to your desires, in the present, so tightly that you cannot

see anything else—even what you truly need.

Imagine that you are thinking, enviously, "I should have my boss's job." If your boss

Imagine that you are thinking, enviously, "I should have my boss's job." If your boss

sticks to his post, stubbornly and competently, thoughts like that will lead you into in a

state of irritation, unhappiness and disgust. You might realize this. You think, “I am

unhappy. However, I could be cured of this unhappiness if I could just fulfill my

ambition.” But then you might think further. “Wait,” you think. “Maybe I’m not unhappy

because I don’t have my boss’s job. Maybe I’m unhappy because I can’t stop wanting that

job.” That doesn’t mean you can just simply and magically tell yourself to stop wanting

that job, and then listen and transform. You won’t—can’t, in fact—just change yourself

that easily. You have to dig deeper. You must change what you are after more profoundly.

So, you might think, “I don’t know what to do about this stupid suffering. I can’t just

abandon my ambitions. That would leave me nowhere to go. But my longing for a job that

I can’t have isn’t working.” You might decide to take a different tack. You might ask,

instead, for the revelation of a different plan: one that would fulfill your desires and

gratify your ambitions in a real sense, but that would remove from your life the bitterness

and resentment with which you are currently affected. You might think, “I will make a

different plan. I will try to want whatever it is *that would make my life better* —whatever that

might be—and I will start working on it now. If that turns out to mean something other

than chasing my boss’s job, I will accept that and I will move forward.”

Now you’re on a whole different kind of trajectory. Before, what was right, desirable,

and worthy of pursuit was something narrow and concrete. But you became stuck there,

tightly jammed and unhappy. So you let go. You make the necessary sacrifice, and allow a

whole new world of possibility, hidden from you because of your previous ambition, to

reveal itself. And there’s a lot there. What would your life look like *, if it were better*? What

would Life Itself look like? What does “better” even mean? You don’t know. And it

doesn’t matter that you don’t know, exactly, right away, because you will start to slowly

see what is “better,” once you have truly decided to want it. You will start to perceive

what remained hidden from you by your presuppositions and preconceptions —by the

previous mechanisms of your vision. You will begin to learn.

This will only work, however, if you genuinely want your life to improve. You can't fool

your implicit perceptual structures. Not even a bit. They aim where you point them. To

retool, to take stock, to aim somewhere better, you have to think it through, bottom to

top. You have to scour your psyche. You have to clean the damned thing up. And you

must be cautious, because making your life better means adopting a lot of responsibility,

and that takes more effort and care than living stupidly in pain and remaining arrogant,

deceitful and resentful.

What if it was the case that the world revealed whatever goodness it contains in precise

proportion to your desire for the best? What if the more your conception of the best has

been elevated, expanded and rendered sophisticated the more possibility and benefit you

could perceive? This doesn't mean that you can have what you want merely by wishing it,

or that everything is interpretation, or that there is no reality. The world is still there,

with its structures and limits. As you move along with it, it cooperates or objects. But you

can dance with it, if your aim is to dance—and maybe you can even lead, if you have

enough skill and enough grace. This is not theology. It's not mysticism. It's empirical

knowledge. There is nothing magical here—or nothing more than the already-present

magic of consciousness. We only see what we aim at. The rest of the world (and that's

most of it) is hidden. If we start aiming at something different—something like "I want

my life to be better"—our minds will start presenting us with new information, derived

from the previously hidden world, to aid us in that pursuit. Then we can put that

information to use and move, and act, and observe, and improve. And, after doing so,

after improving, we might pursue something different, or higher—something like, "I want

whatever might be better than just my life being better." And then we enter a more

elevated and more complete reality.

In that place, what might we focus on? What might we see?

Think about it like this. Start from the observation that we indeed desire things—even

that we need them. That's human nature. We share the experience of hunger, loneliness,

thirst, sexual desire, aggression, fear and pain. Such things are elements of Being—

primordial, axiomatic elements of Being. But we must sort and organize these primordial

desires, because the world is a complex and obstinately real place. We can't just get the

one particular thing we especially just want now, along with everything else we usually

want, because our desires can produce conflict with our other desires, as well as with

other people, and with the world. Thus, we must become conscious of our desires, and

articulate them, and prioritize them, and arrange them into hierarchies. That makes them

sophisticated. That makes them work with each other, and with the desires of other

people, and with the world. It is in that manner that our desires elevate themselves. It is

in that manner that they organize themselves into values and become moral. Our values,

our morality—they are indicators of our sophistication.

The philosophical study of morality—of right and wrong—is ethics. Such study can

render us more sophisticated in our choices. Even older and deeper than ethics, however,

is religion. Religion concerns itself not with (mere) right and wrong but with good and

evil themselves—with the archetypes of right and wrong. Religion concerns itself with

domain of value, ultimate value. That is not the scientific domain. It's not the territory of

empirical description. The people who wrote and edited the Bible, for example, weren't

scientists. They couldn't have been scientists, even if they had wanted to be. The

viewpoints, methods and practices of science hadn't been formulated when the Bible was

written.

Religion is instead *about proper behaviour*. It's about what Plato called "the Good." A

genuine religious acolyte isn't trying to formulate accurate ideas about the objective

nature of the world (although he may be trying to do that to). He's striving, instead, to be

a "good person." It may be the case that to him "good" means nothing but "obedient"—

even blindly obedient. Hence the classic liberal Western enlightenment objection to

religious belief: obedience is not enough. But it's at least a start (and we have forgotten

this): *You cannot aim yourself at anything if you are completely undisciplined and untutored*. You

will not know what to target, and you won't fly straight, even if you somehow get your

aim right. And then you will conclude, "There is nothing to aim for." And then you will

be lost.

It is therefore necessary and desirable for religions to have a dogmatic element. What

good is a value system that does not provide a stable structure? What good is a value

system that does not point the way to a higher order? And what good can you possibly be

if you cannot or do not internalize that structure, or accept that order—not as a final

destination, necessarily, but at least as a starting point? Without that, you're nothing but

an adult two-year-old, without the charm or the potential. That is not to say (to say it

again) that obedience is sufficient. But a person capable of obedience—let's say, instead, a

properly disciplined person—is at least a well-forged tool. At least that (and that is not

nothing). Of course, there must be vision, beyond discipline; beyond dogma. A tool still

needs a purpose. It is for such reasons that Christ said, in the Gospel of Thomas, “The

Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, but men do not see it. ”75

Does that mean that what we see is dependent on our religious beliefs? Yes! And what

we don’t see, as well! You might object, “But I’m an atheist.” No, you’re *not* (and if you

want to understand this, you could read Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, perhaps the

greatest novel ever written, in which the main character, Raskolnikov, decides to take his

atheism with true seriousness, commits what he has rationalized as a benevolent murder,

and pays the price). You’re simply not an atheist in your actions, and it is your actions

that most accurately reflect your deepest beliefs—those that are implicit, embedded in

your being, underneath your conscious apprehensions and articulable attitudes and

surface-level self-knowledge. You can only find out what you actually believe (rather than

what you think you believe) by watching how you act. You simply don't know what you

believe, before that. You are too complex to understand yourself.

It takes careful observation, and education, and reflection, and communication with

others, just to scratch the surface of your beliefs. Everything you value is a product of

unimaginably lengthy developmental processes, personal, cultural and biological. You

don't understand how what you want—and, therefore, what you see—is conditioned by

the immense, abysmal, profound past. You simply don't understand how every neural

circuit through which you peer at the world has been shaped (and painfully) by the

ethical aims of millions of years of human ancestors and all of the life that was lived for

the billions of years before that.

You don't understand anything.

You didn't even know that you were blind.

Some of our knowledge of our beliefs has been documented. We have been watching

ourselves act, reflecting on that watching, and telling stories distilled through that

reflection, for tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of years. That is all part of our

attempts, individual and collective, to discover and articulate what it is that we believe.

Part of the knowledge so generated is what is encapsulated in the fundamental teachings

of our cultures, in ancient writings such as the Tao te Ching, or the aforementioned Vedic

scriptures, or the Biblical stories. The Bible is, for better or worse, the foundational

document of Western civilization (of Western values, Western morality, and Western

conceptions of good and evil). It's the product of processes that remain fundamentally

beyond our comprehension. The Bible is a library composed of many books, each written

and edited by many people. It's a truly emergent document—a selected, sequenced and

finally coherent story written by no one and everyone over many thousands of years. The

Bible has been thrown up, out of the deep, by the collective human imagination, which is

itself a product of unimaginable forces operating over unfathomable spans of time. Its

careful, respectful study can reveal things to us about what we believe and how we do and

should act that can be discovered in almost no other manner.

Old Testament God and New Testament God

The God of the Old Testament can appear harsh, judgmental, unpredictable and

dangerous, particularly on cursory reading. The degree to which this is true has arguably

been exaggerated by Christian commentators, intent on magnifying the distinction

between the older and newer divisions of the Bible. There has been a price paid, however,

for such plotting (and I mean that in both senses of the word): the tendency for modern

people to think, when confronted with Jehovah, “I would never believe in a God like

that.” But Old Testament God doesn’t much care what modern people think. He often

didn’t care what Old Testament people thought, either (although He could be bargained

with, to a surprising degree, as is particularly evident in the Abrahamic stories).

Nonetheless, when His people strayed from the path—when they disobeyed His

injunctions, violated His covenants, and broke His commandments—trouble was certain

to follow. If you did not do what Old Testament God demanded—whatever that might

have been and however you might have tried to hide from it—you and your children and

your children's children were in terrible, serious trouble.

It was realists who created, or noticed, Old Testament God. When the denizens of

those ancient societies wandered carelessly down the wrong path, they ended up enslaved

and miserable—sometimes for centuries—when they were not obliterated completely.

Was that reasonable? Was that just? Was that fair? The authors of the Old Testament

asked such questions with extreme caution and under very limited conditions. They

assumed, instead, that the Creator of Being knew what he was doing, that all power was

essentially with Him, and that His dictates should be carefully followed. They were wise.

He was a Force of Nature. Is a hungry lion reasonable, fair or just? What kind of

nonsensical question is that? The Old Testament Israelites and their forebears knew that

God was not to be trifled with, and that whatever Hell the angry Deity might allow to be

engendered if he was crossed was real. Having recently passed through a century defined

by the bottomless horrors of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, we might realize the same thing.

New Testament God is often presented as a different character (although the Book of

Revelation, with its Final Judgment, warns against any excessively naïve complacency).

He is more the kindly Geppetto, master craftsman and benevolent father. He wants

nothing for us but the best. He is all-loving and all-forgiving. Sure, He'll send you to Hell,

if you misbehave badly enough. Fundamentally, however, he's the God of Love. That

seems more optimistic, more naively welcoming, but (in precise proportion to that) less

believable. In a world such as this—this hothouse of doom—who could buy such a story?

The all-good God, in a post-Auschwitz world? It was for such reasons that the

philosopher Nietzsche, perhaps the most astute critic ever to confront Christianity,

considered New Testament God the worst literary crime in Western history. In *Beyond*

Good and Evil, he wrote:[76]

In the Jewish 'Old Testament', the book of divine justice, there are men, things and speeches on such a grand

style that Greek and Indian literature has nothing to compare with it. One stands with fear and reverence before

those stupendous remains of what man was formerly, and one has sad thoughts about old Asia and its little out-

pushed peninsula Europe.… To have bound up this New Testament (a kind of ROCOCO of taste in every

respect) along with the Old Testament into one book, as the “Bible,” as “The Book in Itself” is perhaps the

greatest audacity and “sin against the spirit” which literary Europe has on its conscience.

Who but the most naive among us could posit that such an all-good, merciful Being ruled

this so-terrible world? But something that seems incomprehensible to someone unseeing

might be perfectly evident to someone who had opened his eyes.

Let’s return to the situation where your aim is being determined by something petty—

your aforementioned envy of your boss. Because of that envy, the world you inhabit

reveals itself as a place of bitterness, disappointment and spite. Imagine that you come to

notice, and contemplate, and reconsider your unhappiness. Further, you determine to

accept responsibility for it, and dare to posit that it might be something at least partly

under your control. You crack open one eye, for a moment, and look. You ask for

something better. You sacrifice your pettiness, repent of your envy, and open your heart.

Instead of cursing the darkness, you let in a little light. You decide to aim for a better life

—instead of a better office.

But you don't stop there. You realize that it's a mistake to aim for a better life, if it

comes at the cost of worsening someone else's. So, you get creative. You decide to play a

more difficult game. You decide that you want a better life, in a manner that will also

make the life of your family better. Or the life of your family, and your friends. Or the life

of your family, and your friends, and the strangers who surround them. What about your

enemies? Do you want to include them, too? You bloody well don't know how to manage

that. But you've read some history. You know how enmity compounds. So, you start to

wish even your enemies well, at least in principle, although you are by no means yet a

master of such sentiments.

And the direction of your sight changes. You see past the limitations that hemmed you

in, unknowingly. New possibilities for your life emerge, and you work toward their

realization. Your life indeed improves. And then you start to think, further: “Better?

Perhaps that means better for me, and my family, and my friends—even for my enemies.

85

But that’s not all it means. It means better today, in a manner that makes everything

better tomorrow, and next week, and next year, and a decade from now, and a hundred

years from now. And a thousand years from now. And forever.”

And then “better” means to aim at the Improvement of Being, with a capital “I’ and a

capital “B.” Thinking all of this—realizing all of this—you take a risk. You decide that you

will start treating Old Testament God, with all His terrible and oft-arbitrary-seeming

power, as if He could also be New Testament God (even though you understand the many

ways in which that is absurd). In other words, you decide to act as if existence might be

justified by its goodness—if only you behaved properly. And it is that decision, that

declaration of existential faith, that allows you to overcome nihilism, and resentment, and

arrogance. It is that declaration of faith that keeps hatred of Being, with all its attendant

evils, at bay. And, as for such faith: it is not at all the will to believe things that you know

perfectly well to be false. Faith is not the childish belief in magic. That is ignorance or

even willful blindness. It is instead the realization that the tragic irrationalities of life

must be counterbalanced by an equally irrational commitment to the essential goodness

of Being. It is simultaneously the will to dare set your sights at the unachievable, and to

sacrifice everything, including (and most importantly) your life. You realize that you have,

literally, nothing better to do. But how can you do all this?—assuming you are foolish

enough to try.

You might start by *not thinking*—or, more accurately, but less trenchantly, by refusing to

subjugate your faith to your current rationality, and its narrowness of view. This doesn't

mean "make yourself stupid." It means the opposite. It means instead that you must quit

manoeuvring and calculating and conniving and scheming and enforcing and demanding

and avoiding and ignoring and punishing. It means you must place your old strategies

aside. It means, instead, that you must pay attention, as you may never have paid

attention before.

Pay Attention

Pay attention. Focus on your surroundings, physical and psychological. Notice something

that bothers you, that concerns you, that will not let you be, which you *could* fix, that you

would fix. You can find such somethings by asking yourself (as if you genuinely want to

know) three questions: “What is it that is bothering me?” “Is that something I could fix?”

and “Would I actually be willing to fix it?” If you find that the answer is “no,” to any or

all of the questions, then look elsewhere. Aim lower. Search until you find something that

bothers you, that you could fix, that you would fix, and then fix it. That might be enough

for the day.

Maybe there is a stack of paper on your desk, and you have been avoiding it. You won’t

even really look at it, when you walk into your room. There are terrible things lurking

there: tax forms, and bills and letters from people wanting things you aren't sure you can

deliver. Notice your fear, and have some sympathy for it. Maybe there are snakes in that

pile of paper. Maybe you'll get bitten. Maybe there are even hydras lurking there. You'll

cut off one head, and seven more will grow. How could you possibly cope with that?

You could ask yourself, "Is there anything at all that I might be willing to do about that

pile of paper? Would I look, maybe, at one part of it? For twenty minutes?" Maybe the

answer will be, "No!" But you might look for ten, or even for five (and if not that, for

one). Start there. You will soon find that the entire pile shrinks in significance, merely

because you have looked at part of it. And you'll find that the whole thing is made of

parts. What if you allowed yourself a glass of wine with dinner, or curled up on the sofa

and read, or watched a stupid movie, as a reward? What if you instructed your wife, or

your husband, to say "good job" after you fixed whatever you fixed? Would that motivate

you? The people from whom thanks you want might not be very proficient in offering it,

to begin with, but that shouldn't stop you. People can learn, even if they are very

unskilled at the beginning. Ask yourself what you would require to be motivated to

undertake the job, honestly, and listen to the answer. Don't tell yourself, "I shouldn't

need to do that to motivate myself." What do you know about yourself? You are, on the

one hand, the most complex thing in the entire universe, and on the other, someone who

can't even set the clock on your microwave. Don't over-estimate your self-knowledge.

Let the tasks for the day announce themselves for your contemplation. Maybe you can

do this in the morning, as you sit on the edge of your bed. Maybe you can try, the night

before, when you are preparing to sleep. Ask yourself for a voluntary contribution. If you

ask nicely, and listen carefully, and don't try any treachery, you might be offered one. Do

this every day, for a while. Then do it for the rest of your life. Soon you will find yourself

in a different situation. Now you will be asking yourself, habitually, "What could I do,

that I would do, to make Life a little better?" You are not dictating to yourself what

"better" must be. You are not being a totalitarian, or a utopian, even to yourself, because

you have learned from the Nazis and the Soviets and the Maoists and from your own

experience that being a totalitarian is a bad thing. Aim high. Set your sights on the

betterment of Being. Align yourself, in your soul, with Truth and the Highest Good. There

is habitable order to establish and beauty to bring into existence. There is evil to

overcome, suffering to ameliorate, and yourself to better.

It is this, in my reading, that is the culminating ethic of the canon of the West. It is

this, furthermore, that is communicated by those eternally confusing, glowing stanzas

from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the essence, in some sense, of the wisdom of the

New Testament. This is the attempt of the Spirit of Mankind to transform the

understanding of ethics from the initial, necessary Thou Shalt Not of the child and the

Ten Commandments into the fully articulated, positive vision of the true individual. This

is the expression not merely of admirable self-control and self-mastery but of the

fundamental desire to set the world right. This is not the cessation of sin, but sin's

opposite, good itself. The Sermon on the Mount outlines the true nature of man, and the

proper aim of mankind: concentrate on the day, so that you can live in the present, and

attend completely and properly to what is right in front of you—but do that only after you

have decided to let what is within shine forth, so that it can justify Being and illuminate

the world. Do that only after you have determined to sacrifice whatever it is that must be

sacrificed so that you can pursue the highest good.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall

he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be

clothed?

(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all

these things.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. (Luke 12: 22–34)

Realization is dawning. Instead of playing the tyrant, therefore, you are paying attention.

You are telling the truth, instead of manipulating the world. You are negotiating, instead

of playing the martyr or the tyrant. You no longer have to be envious, because you no

longer know that someone else truly has it better. You no longer have to be frustrated,

because you have learned to aim low, and to be patient. You are discovering who you are,

and what you want, and what you are willing to do. You are finding that the solutions to

your particular problems have to be tailored to you, personally and precisely. You are less

concerned with the actions of other people, because you have plenty to do yourself.

Attend to the day, but aim at the highest good.

Now, your trajectory is heavenward. That makes you hopeful. Even a man on a sinking

ship can be happy when he clambers aboard a lifeboat! And who knows where he might

go, in the future. To journey happily may well be better than to arrive successfully.…

Ask, and ye shall receive. Knock, and the door will open. If you ask, as if you want, and

knock, as if you want to enter, you may be offered the chance to improve your life, a little;

a lot; completely—and with that improvement, some progress will be made in Being

itself.

Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.

THE COMMON LAW

HERE THE COMMON LAW OF ENGLAND WAS ESTABLISHED ON THIS CONTINENT WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST SETTLERS ON MAY 13, 1607. THE FIRST CHARTER GRANTED BY JAMES I TO THE VIRGINIA COMPANY IN 1606 DECLARED THAT THE INHABITANTS OF THE COLONY "...SHALL HAVE AND ENJOY ALL LIBERTIES, FRANCHISES AND IMMUNITIES... AS IF THEY HAD BEEN ABIDING AND BORNE WITHIN THIS OUR REALME OF ENGLANDE...". SINCE MAGNA CARTA THE COMMON LAW HAS BEEN THE CORNERSTONE OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTIES, EVEN AS AGAINST THE CROWN. SUMMARIZED LATER IN THE BILL OF RIGHTS ITS PRINCIPLES HAVE INSPIRED THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR SYSTEM OF FREEDOM UNDER LAW, WHICH IS AT ONCE OUR DEAREST POSSESSION AND PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENT.

PRESENTED BY THE VIRGINIA STATE BAR MAY 17, 1959

R U L E 5

DO NOT LET YOUR CHILDREN DO ANYTHING THAT MAKES

YOU DISLIKE THEM

ACTUALLY, IT'S NOT OK

Recently, I watched a three-year-old boy trail his mother and father slowly through a

crowded airport. He was screaming violently at five-second intervals—and, more

important, he was doing it voluntarily. He wasn't at the end of this tether. As a parent, I

could tell from the tone. He was irritating his parents and hundreds of other people to

gain attention. Maybe he needed something. But that was no way to get it, and his

parents should have let him know that. You might object that "perhaps they were worn

out, and jet-lagged, after a long trip." But thirty seconds of carefully directed problem-

solving would have brought the shameful episode to a halt. More thoughtful parents

would not have let someone they truly cared for become the object of a crowd's contempt.

I have also watched a couple, unable or unwilling to say no to their two-year-old,

obliged to follow closely behind him everywhere he went, every moment of what was

supposed to be an enjoyable social visit, because he misbehaved so badly when not micro-

managed that he could not be given a second of genuine freedom without risk. The desire

of his parents to let their child act without correction on every impulse perversely

produced precisely the opposite effect: they deprived him instead of every opportunity to

engage in independent action. Because they did not dare to teach him what "No" means,

he had no conception of the reasonable limits enabling maximal toddler autonomy. It was

a classic example of too much chaos breeding too much order (and the inevitable

reversal). I have, similarly, seen parents rendered unable to engage in adult conversation

at a dinner party because their children, four and five, dominated the social scene, eating

the centres out of all the sliced bread, subjecting everyone to their juvenile tyranny, while

mom and dad watched, embarrassed and bereft of the ability to intervene.

When my now-adult daughter was a child, another child once hit her on the head with

a metal toy truck. I watched that same child, one year later, viciously push his younger

sister backwards over a fragile glass-surfaced coffee table. His mother picked him up,

immediately afterward (but not her frightened daughter), and told him in hushed tones

not to do such things, while she patted him comfortingly in a manner clearly indicative of

approval. She was out to produce a little God-Emperor of the Universe. That's the

unstated goal of many a mother, including many who consider themselves advocates for

full gender equality. Such women will object vociferously to any command uttered by an

adult male, but will trot off in seconds to make their progeny a peanut-butter sandwich if

he demands it while immersed self-importantly in a video game. The future mates of such

boys have every reason to hate their mothers-in-law. Respect for women? That's for other

boys, other men—not for their dear sons.

Something of the same sort may underlie, in part, the preference for male children seen

most particularly in places such as India, Pakistan and China, where sex-selective

abortion is widely practised. The Wikipedia entry for that practice attributes its existence

to “cultural norms” favouring male over female children. (I cite Wikipedia because it is

collectively written and edited and, therefore, the perfect place to find accepted wisdom.)

But there’s no evidence that such ideas are strictly cultural. There are plausible psycho-

biological reasons for the evolution of such an attitude, and they’re not pretty, from a

modern, egalitarian perspective. If circumstances force you to put all your eggs into one

basket, so to speak, a son is a better bet, by the strict standards of evolutionary logic,

where the proliferation of your genes is all that matters. Why?

Well, a reproductively successful daughter might gain you eight or nine children. The

Holocaust survivor Yitta Schwartz, a star in this regard, had three generations of direct

descendants who matched such performance. She was the ancestor of almost two

thousand people by the time of her death in 2010.77 But the sky is truly the limit with a

reproductively successful son. Sex with multiple female partners is his ticket to

exponential reproduction (given our species' practical limitation to single births).

Rumour has it that the actor Warren Beatty and the athlete Wilt Chamberlain each

bedded multiple thousands of women (something not unknown, as well, among rock

stars). They didn't produce children in those numbers. Modern birth control limits that.

But similar celebrity types in the past have done so. The forefather of the Qing dynasty,

Giocangga (circa 1550), for example, is the male-line ancestor of a million and a half

people in northeastern China.[78] The medieval Uí Néill dynasty produced up to three

million male descendants, localized mainly in northwestern Ireland and the US, through

Irish emigration. [79] And the king of them all, Genghis Khan, conqueror of much of Asia, is

forefather of 8 percent of the men in Central Asia—sixteen million male descendants, 34

generations later. [80] So, from a deep, biological perspective there are reasons why parents

might favour sons sufficiently to eliminate female fetuses, although I am not claiming

direct causality, nor suggesting a lack of other, more culturally-dependent reasons.

Preferential treatment awarded a son during development might even help produce an

attractive, well-rounded, confident man. This happened in the case of the father of

psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, by his own account: “A man who has been the

indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror, that

confidence of success that often induces real success.” 81 Fair enough. But “feeling of a

conqueror” can all too easily become “actual conqueror.” Genghis Khan’s outstanding

reproductive success certainly came at the cost of any success whatsoever for others

(including the dead millions of Chinese, Persians, Russians and Hungarians). Spoiling a

son might therefore work well from the standpoint of the “selfish gene” (allowing the

favoured child’s genes to replicate themselves in innumerable offspring), to use the

evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’ famous expression. But it can make for a dark,

painful spectacle in the here and now, and mutate into something indescribably

dangerous.

None of this means that all mothers favour all sons over their daughters (or that

daughters are not sometimes favoured over sons, or that fathers don't sometimes favor

their sons). Other factors can clearly dominate. Sometimes, for example, unconscious

hatred (sometimes not-so-unconscious, either) overrides any concern a parent might have

for any child, regardless of gender or personality or situation. I saw a four-year old boy

allowed to go hungry on a regular basis. His nanny had been injured, and he was being

cycled through the neighbours for temporary care. When his mother dropped him off at

our house, she indicated that he wouldn't eat at all, all day. "That's OK," she said. It

wasn't OK (in case that's not obvious). This was the same four-year-old boy who clung to

my wife for hours in absolute desperation and total commitment, when she tenaciously,

persistently and mercifully managed to feed him an entire lunch-time meal, rewarding

him throughout for his cooperation, and refusing to let him fail. He started out with a

closed mouth, sitting with all of us at the dining room table, my wife and I, our two kids,

and two neighbourhood kids we looked after during the day. She put the spoon in front of

him, waiting patiently, persistently, while he moved his head back and forth, refusing it

entry, using defensive methods typical of a recalcitrant and none-too-well-attended two-

year old.

She didn't let him fail. She patted him on the head every time he managed a mouthful,

She didn't let him fail. She patted him on the head every time he managed a mouthful,

telling him sincerely that he was a "good boy" when he did so. She did think he was a

good boy. He was a cute, damaged kid. Ten not-too-painful minutes later he finished his

meal. We were all watching intently. It was a drama of life and death.

"Look," she said, holding up his bowl. "You finished all of it." This boy, who was

standing in the corner, voluntarily and unhappily, when I first saw him; who wouldn't

interact with the other kids, who frowned chronically, who wouldn't respond to me when

I tickled and prodded him, trying to get him to play—this boy broke immediately into a

wide, radiant smile. It brought joy to everyone at the table. Twenty years later, writing it

down today, it still brings me to tears. Afterward, he followed my wife around like a

puppy for the rest of the day, refusing to let her out of his sight. When she sat down, he

jumped in her lap, cuddling in, opening himself back up to the world, searching

desperately for the love he had been continually denied. Later in the day, but far too soon,

his mother reappeared. She came down the stairs into the room we all occupied. “Oh,

SuperMom,” she uttered, resentfully, seeing her son curled up in my wife’s lap. Then she

departed, black, murderous heart unchanged, doomed child in hand. She was a

psychologist. The things you can see, with even a single open eye. It’s no wonder that

people want to stay blind.

Everybody Hates Arithmetic

My clinical clients frequently come to me to discuss their day-to-day familial problems.

Such quotidian concerns are insidious. Their habitual and predictable occurrence makes

them appear trivial. But that appearance of triviality is deceptive: it is the things that

occur every single day that truly make up our lives, and time spent the same way over and

again adds up at an alarming rate. One father recently spoke with me about the trouble he

was having putting his son to sleep at night fn1 —a ritual that typically involved about three-quarters of an hour of fighting. We did the arithmetic. Forty-five minutes a day,

seven days a week—that's three hundred minutes, or five hours, a week. Five hours for

each of the four weeks of a month—that's twenty hours per month. Twenty hours a

month for twelve months is two hundred and forty hours a year. That's a month and a

half of standard forty-hour work weeks.

My client was spending a month and a half of work weeks per year fighting ineffectually

and miserably with his son. Needless to say, both were suffering for it. No matter how

good your intentions, or how sweet and tolerant your temperament, you will not maintain

good relations with someone you fight with for a month and a half of work weeks per

year. Resentment will inevitably build. Even if it doesn't, all that wasted, unpleasant time

could clearly be spent in more productive and useful and less stressful and more enjoyable

activity. How are such situations to be understood? Where does the fault lie, in child or in

parent? In nature or society? And what, if anything, is to be done?

Some localize all such problems in the adult, whether in the parent or broader society.

“There are no bad children,” such people think, “only bad parents.” When the idealized

image of an unsullied child is brought to mind, this notion appears fully justified. The

beauty, openness, joy, trust and capacity for love characterizing children makes it easy to

attribute full culpability to the adults on the scene. But such an attitude is dangerously

and naively romantic. It’s too one-sided, in the case of parents granted a particularly

difficult son or daughter. It’s also not for the best that all human corruption is uncritically

laid at society’s feet. That conclusion merely displaces the problem, back in time. It

explains nothing, and solves no problems. If society is corrupt, but not the individuals

within it, then where did the corruption originate? How is it propagated? It’s a one-sided,

deeply ideological theory.

Even more problematic is the insistence logically stemming from this presumption of

social corruption that all individual problems, no matter how rare, must be solved by

cultural restructuring, no matter how radical. Our society faces the increasing call to

deconstruct its stabilizing traditions to include smaller and smaller numbers of people

who do not or will not fit into the categories upon which even our perceptions are based.

This is not a good thing. Each person's private trouble cannot be solved by a social

revolution, because revolutions are destabilizing and dangerous. We have learned to live

together and organize our complex societies slowly and incrementally, over vast stretches

of time, and we do not understand with sufficient exactitude why what we are doing

works. Thus, altering our ways of social being carelessly in the name of some ideological

shibboleth (diversity springs to mind) is likely to produce far more trouble than good,

given the suffering that even small revolutions generally produce.

Was it really a good thing, for example, to so dramatically liberalize the divorce laws in

the 1960s? It's not clear to me that the children whose lives were destabilized by the

hypothetical freedom this attempt at liberation introduced would say so. Horror and

terror lurk behind the walls provided so wisely by our ancestors. We tear them down at

our peril. We skate, unconsciously, on thin ice, with deep, cold waters below, where

unimaginable monsters lurk.

I see today's parents as terrified by their children, not least because they have been

deemed the proximal agents of this hypothetical social tyranny, and simultaneously

denied credit for their role as benevolent and necessary agents of discipline, order and

conventionality. They dwell uncomfortably and self-consciously in the shadow of the all-

too-powerful shadow of the adolescent ethos of the 1960s, a decade whose excesses led to

a general denigration of adulthood, an unthinking disbelief in the existence of competent

power, and the inability to distinguish between the chaos of immaturity and responsible

freedom. This has increased parental sensitivity to the short-term emotional suffering of

their children, while heightening their fear of damaging their children to a painful and

counterproductive degree. Better this than the reverse, you might argue—but there are

catastrophes lurking at the extremes of every moral continuum.

The Ignoble Savage

It has been said that every individual is the conscious or unconscious follower of some

influential philosopher. The belief that children have an intrinsically unsullied spirit,

damaged only by culture and society, is derived in no small part from the eighteenth-

century Genevan French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.82 Rousseau was a fervent

believer in the corrupting influence of human society and private ownership alike. He

claimed that nothing was so gentle and wonderful as man in his pre-civilized state. At

precisely the same time, noting his inability as a father, he abandoned five of his children

to the tender and fatal mercies of the orphanages of the time.

The noble savage Rousseau described, however, was an ideal—an abstraction,

archetypal and religious—and not the flesh-and-blood reality he supposed. The

mythologically perfect Divine Child permanently inhabits our imagination. He's the

potential of youth, the newborn hero, the wronged innocent, and the long-lost son of the

rightful king. He's the intimations of immortality that accompany our earliest

experiences. He's Adam, the perfect man, walking without sin with God in the Garden

before the Fall. But human beings are evil, as well as good, and the darkness that dwells

forever in our souls is also there in no small part in our younger selves. In general, people

improve with age, rather than worsening, becoming kinder, more conscientious, and more

emotionally stable as they mature.[83] Bullying at the sheer and often terrible intensity of

the schoolyard[84] rarely manifests itself in grown-up society. William Golding's dark and

anarchistic *Lord of the Flies* is a classic for a reason.

Furthermore, there is plenty of direct evidence that the horrors of human behaviour

cannot be so easily attributed to history and society. This was discovered most painfully,

perhaps, by the primatologist Jane Goodall, beginning in 1974, when she learned that her

beloved chimpanzees were capable of and willing to murder each other (to use the

terminology appropriate to humans). 85 Because of its shocking nature and great

anthropological significance, she kept her observations secret for years, fearing that her

contact with the animals had led them to manifest unnatural behaviour. Even after she

published her account, many refused to believe it. It soon became obvious, however, that

what she observed was by no means rare.

Bluntly put: chimpanzees conduct inter-tribal warfare. Furthermore, they do it with

almost unimaginable brutality. The typical full-grown chimp is more than twice as strong

as a comparable human being, despite their smaller size.86 Goodall reported with some

terror the proclivity of the chimps she studied to snap strong steel cables and levers.87

Chimps can literally tear each other to pieces—and they do. Human societies and their

complex technologies cannot be blamed for that. 88 "Often when I woke in the night," she

wrote, "horrific pictures sprang unbidden to my mind—Satan [a long-observed chimp]

cupping his hand below Sniff's chin to drink the blood that welled from a great wound in

his face … Jomeo tearing a strip of skin from Dé's thigh; Figan, charging and hitting,

again and again, the stricken, quivering body of Goliath, one of his childhood heroes." 89

Small gangs of adolescent chimps, mostly male, roam the borders of their territory. If they

encounter foreigners (even chimps they once knew, who had broken away from the now-

too-large group) and, if they outnumber them, the gang will mob and destroy them,

without mercy. Chimps don't have much of a super-ego, and it is prudent to remember

that the human capacity for self-control may also be overestimated. Careful perusal of

book as shocking and horrific as Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking*,90 which describes the

brutal decimation of that Chinese city by the invading Japanese, will disenchant even a

committed romantic. And the less said about Unit 731, a covert Japanese biological

warfare research unit established at that time, the better. Read about it at your peril. You

have been warned.

Hunter-gatherers, too, are much more murderous than their urban, industrialized

counterparts, despite their communal lives and localized cultures. The yearly rate of

homicide in the modern UK is about 1 per 100,000.91 It's four to five times higher in the

US, and about ninety times higher in Honduras, which has the highest rate recorded of

any modern nation. But the evidence strongly suggests that human beings have become

more peaceful, rather than less so, as time has progressed and societies became larger and

more organized. The !Kung bushmen of Africa, romanticized in the 1950s by Elizabeth

Marshall Thomas as "the harmless people, "92 had a yearly murder rate of 40 per 100,000,

which declined by more than 30% once they became subject to state authority.93 This is a

very instructive example of complex social structures serving to reduce, not exacerbate,

the violent tendencies of human beings. Yearly rates of 300 per 100,000 have been

reported for the Yanomami of Brazil, famed for their aggression—but the stats don't max

out there. The denizens of Papua, New Guinea, kill each other at yearly rates ranging

from 140 to 1000 per 100,000. 94 However, the record appears to be held by the Kato, an

indigeneous people of California, 1450 of whom per 100,000 met a violent death circa

1840.95

Because children, like other human beings, are not only good, they cannot simply be

left to their own devices, untouched by society, and bloom into perfection. Even dogs

must be socialized if they are to become acceptable members of the pack—and children

are much more complex than dogs. This means that they are much more likely to go

complexly astray if they are not trained, disciplined and properly encouraged. This means

that it is not just wrong to attribute all the violent tendencies of human beings to the

pathologies of social structure. It's wrong enough to be virtually backward. The vital

process of socialization prevents much harm and fosters much good. Children must be

shaped and informed, or they cannot thrive. This fact is reflected starkly in their behavior:

kids are utterly desperate for attention from both peers and adults because such attention,

which renders them effective and sophisticated communal players, is vitally necessary.

Children can be damaged as much or more by a lack of incisive attention as they are by

abuse, mental or physical. This is damage by omission, rather than commission, but it is

no less severe and long-lasting. Children are damaged when their "mercifully" inattentive

parents fail to make them sharp and observant and awake and leave them, instead, in an

unconscious and undifferentiated state. Children are damaged when those charged with

their care, afraid of any conflict or upset, no longer dare to correct them, and leave them

without guidance. I can recognize such children on the street. They are doughy and

unfocused and vague. They are leaden and dull instead of golden and bright. They are

uncarved blocks, trapped in a perpetual state of waiting-to-be.

Such children are chronically ignored by their peers. This is because they are not fun to

play with. Adults tend to manifest the same attitude (although they will deny it

desperately when pressed). When I worked in daycare centres, early in my career, the

comparatively neglected children would come to me desperately, in their fumbling, half-

formed manner, with no sense of proper distance and no attentive playfulness. They

would flop, nearby—or directly on my lap, no matter what I was doing—driven inexorably

by the powerful desire for adult attention, the necessary catalyst for further development.

It was very difficult not to react with annoyance, even disgust, to such children and their

too-prolonged infantilism—difficult not to literally push them aside—even though I felt

very badly for them, and understood their predicament well. I believe that response, harsh

and terrible though it may be, was an almost universally-experienced internal warning

signal indicating the comparative danger of establishing a relationship with a poorly

socialized child: the likelihood of immediate and inappropriate dependence (which should

have been the responsibility of the parent) and the tremendous demand of time and

resources that accepting such dependence would necessitate. Confronted with such a

situation, potentially friendly peers and interested adults are much more likely to turn

their attention to interacting with other children whose cost/benefit ratio, to speak

bluntly, would be much lower.

Parent or Friend

The neglect and mistreatment that is part and parcel of poorly structured or even entirely

absent disciplinary approaches can be deliberate—motivated by explicit, conscious (if

misguided) parental motives. But more often than not, modern parents are simply

paralyzed by the fear that they will no longer be liked or even loved by their children if

they chastise them for any reason. They want their children's friendship above all, and are

willing to sacrifice respect to get it. This is not good. A child will have many friends, but

only two parents—if that—and parents are more, not less, than friends. Friends have very

limited authority to correct. Every parent therefore needs to learn to tolerate the

momentary anger or even hatred directed towards them by their children, after necessary

corrective action has been taken, as the capacity of children to perceive or care about long-

term consequences is very limited. Parents are the arbiters of society. They teach children

how to behave so that other people will be able to interact meaningfully and productively

with them.

96

It is an act of responsibility to discipline a child. It is not anger at misbehavior. It is not

revenge for a misdeed. It is instead a careful combination of mercy and long-term

judgment. Proper discipline requires effort—indeed, is virtually synonymous with effort.

It is difficult to pay careful attention to children. It is difficult to figure out what is wrong

and what is right and why. It is difficult to formulate just and compassionate strategies of

discipline, and to negotiate their application with others deeply involved in a child's care.

Because of this combination of responsibility and difficulty, any suggestion that all

constraints placed on children are damaging can be perversely welcome. Such a notion,

once accepted, allows adults who should know better to abandon their duty to serve as

agents of enculturation and pretend that doing so is good for children. It's a deep and

pernicious act of self-deception. It's lazy, cruel and inexcusable. And our proclivity to

rationalize does not end there.

We assume that rules will irremediably inhibit what would otherwise be the boundless

and intrinsic creativity of our children, even though the scientific literature clearly

indicates, first, that creativity beyond the trivial is shockingly rare[96] and, second, that

strict limitations facilitate rather than inhibit creative achievement.[97] Belief in the purely

destructive element of rules and structure is frequently conjoined with the idea that

children will make good choices about when to sleep and what to eat, if their perfect

natures are merely allowed to manifest themselves. These are equally ungrounded

assumptions. Children are perfectly capable of attempting to subsist on hot dogs, chicken

fingers and Froot Loops if doing so will attract attention, provide power, or shield them

from trying anything new. Instead of going to bed wisely and peacefully, children will

fight night-time unconsciousness until they are staggered by fatigue. They are also

perfectly willing to provoke adults, while exploring the complex contours of the social

environment, just like juvenile chimps harassing the adults in their troupes.[98] Observing

the consequences of teasing and taunting enables chimp and child alike to discover the

limits of what might otherwise be a too-unstructured and terrifying freedom. Such limits,

when discovered, provide security, even if their detection causes momentary

disappointment or frustration.

I remember taking my daughter to the playground once when she was about two. She

was playing on the monkey bars, hanging in mid-air. A particularly provocative little

monster of about the same age was standing above her on the same bar she was gripping.

I watched him move towards her. Our eyes locked. He slowly and deliberately stepped on

her hands, with increasing force, over and over, as he stared me down. He knew exactly

what he was doing. Up yours, Daddy-O—that was his philosophy. He had already

concluded that adults were contemptible, and that he could safely defy them. (Too bad,

then, that he was destined to become one.) That was the hopeless future his parents had

saddled him with. To his great and salutary shock, I picked him bodily off the playground

structure, and threw him thirty feet down the field.

No, I didn't. I just took my daughter somewhere else. But it would have been better for

him if I had.

Imagine a toddler repeatedly striking his mother in the face. Why would he do such a

thing? It's a stupid question. It's unacceptably naive. The answer is obvious. To dominate

his mother. To see if he can get away with it. Violence, after all, is no mystery. It's peace

that's the mystery. Violence is the default. It's easy. It's peace that is difficult: learned,

inculcated, earned. (People often get basic psychological questions backwards. Why do

people take drugs? Not a mystery. It's why they don't take them all the time that's the

mystery. Why do people suffer from anxiety? That's not a mystery. How is that people

can ever be calm? There's the mystery. We're breakable and mortal. A million things can

go wrong, in a million ways. We should be terrified out of our skulls at every second. But

we're not. The same can be said for depression, laziness and criminality.)

If I can hurt and overpower you, then I can do exactly what I want, when I want, even

when you're around. I can torment you, to appease my curiosity. I can take the attention

away from you, and dominate you. I can steal your toy. Children hit first because

aggression is innate, although more dominant in some individuals and less in others, and,

second, because aggression facilitates desire. It's foolish to assume that such behaviour

must be learned. A snake does not have to be taught to strike. It's in the nature of the

beast. Two-year-olds, statistically speaking, are the most violent of people.[99] They kick,

hit and bite, and they steal the property of others. They do so to explore, to express

outrage and frustration, and to gratify their impulsive desires. More importantly, for our

purposes, they do so to discover the true limits of permissible behaviour. How else are

they ever going to puzzle out what is acceptable? Infants are like blind people, searching

for a wall. They have to push forward, and test, to see where the actual boundaries lie

(and those are too-seldom where they are said to be).

Consistent correction of such action indicates the limits of acceptable aggression to the

child. Its absence merely heightens curiosity—so the child will hit and bite and kick, if he

is aggressive and dominant, until something indicates a limit. How hard can I hit

Mommy? Until she objects. Given that, correction is better sooner than later (if the

desired end result of the parent is not to be hit). Correction also helps the child learn that

hitting others is a sub-optimal social strategy. Without that correction, no child is going

to undergo the effortful process of organizing and regulating their impulses, so that those

impulses can coexist, without conflict, within the psyche of the child, and in the broader

social world. It is no simple matter to organize a mind.

My son was particularly ornery when he was a toddler. When my daughter was little, I

could paralyze her into immobility with an evil glance. Such an intervention had no effect

at all on my son. He had my wife (who is no pushover) stymied at the dinner table by the

time he was nine months of age. He fought her for control over the spoon. “Good!” we

thought. We didn't want to feed him one more minute than necessary anyway. But the

little blighter would only eat three or four mouthfuls. Then he would play. He would stir

his food around in his bowl. He would drop bits of it over the high chair table top, and

watch as it fell on the floor below. No problem. He was exploring. But then he wasn't

eating enough. Then, because he wasn't eating enough, he wasn't sleeping enough. Then

his midnight crying was waking his parents. Then they were getting grumpy and out of

sorts. He was frustrating his mother, and she was taking it out on me. The trajectory

wasn't good.

After a few days of this degeneration, I decided to take the spoon back. I prepared for

war. I set aside sufficient time. A patient adult can defeat a two-year-old, hard as that is to

believe. As the saying goes: "Old age and treachery can always overcome youth and skill."

This is partly because time lasts forever, when you're two. Half an hour for me was a

week for my son. I assured myself of victory. He was stubborn and horrible. But I could be

worse. We sat down, face to face, bowl in front of him. It was *High Noon*. He knew it, and

I knew it. He picked up the spoon. I took it from him, and spooned up a delicious

mouthful of mush. I moved it deliberately towards his mouth. He eyed me in precisely the

same manner as the playground foot monster. He curled his lips downward into a tight

frown, rejecting all entry. I chased his mouth around with the spoon as he twisted his

head around in tight circles.

But I had more tricks up my sleeve. I poked him in the chest, with my free hand, in a

manner calculated to annoy. He didn't budge. I did it again. And again. And again. Not

hard—but not in a manner to be ignored, either. Ten or so pokes letter, he opened his

mouth, planning to emit a sound of outrage. Hah! His mistake. I deftly inserted the

spoon. He tried, gamely, to force out the offending food with his tongue. But I know how

to deal with that, too. I just placed my forefinger horizontally across his lips. Some came

out. But some was swallowed, too. Score one for Dad. I gave him a pat on the head, and

told him that he was a good boy. And I meant it. When someone does something you are

trying to get them to do, reward them. No grudge after victory. An hour later, it was all

over. There was outrage. There was some wailing. My wife had to leave the room. The

stress was too much. But food was eaten by child. My son collapsed, exhausted, on my

chest. We had a nap together. And he liked me a lot better when he woke up than he had

before he was disciplined.

This was something I commonly observed when we went head to head—and not only

with him. A little later we entered into a babysitting swap with another couple. All the

kids would get together at one house. Then one pair of parents would go out to dinner, or

a movie, and leave the other pair to watch the children, who were all under three. One

evening, another set of parents joined us. I was unfamiliar with their son, a large, strong

boy of two.

“He won’t sleep,” said his father. “After you put him to bed, he will crawl out of his

bed, and come downstairs. We usually put on an Elmo video and let him watch it.”

“There’s no damn way I’m rewarding a recalcitrant child for unacceptable behaviour,” I

thought, “and I’m certainly not showing anyone any Elmo video.” I always hated that

creepy, whiny puppet. He was a disgrace to Jim Henson’s legacy. So reward-by-Elmo was

not on the table. I didn’t say anything, of course. There is just no talking to parents about

their children—until they are ready to listen.

Two hours later, we put the kids to bed. Four of the five went promptly to sleep—but

not the Muppet aficionado. I had placed him in a crib, however, so he couldn’t escape. But

he could still howl, and that’s exactly what he did. That was tricky. It was good strategy

on his part. It was annoying, and it threatened to wake up all the other kids, who would

then also start to howl. Score one for the kid. So, I journeyed into the bedroom. “Lie

down,” I said. That produced no effect. “Lie down,” I said, “or I will lay you down.”

Reasoning with kids isn’t often of too much use, particularly under such circumstances,

but I believe in fair warning. Of course, he didn’t lie down. He howled again, for effect.

Kids do this frequently. Scared parents think that a crying child is always sad or hurt.

This is simply not true. Anger is one of the most common reasons for crying. Careful

analysis of the musculature patterns of crying children has confirmed this. [100] Anger-

crying and fear-or-sadness crying do not look the same. They also don't sound the same,

and can be distinguished with careful attention. Anger-crying is often an act of

dominance, and should be dealt with as such. I lifted him up, and laid him down. Gently.

Patiently. But firmly. He got up. I laid him down. He got up. I laid him down. He got up.

This time, I laid him down, and kept my hand on his back. He struggled, mightily, but

ineffectually. He was, after all, only one-tenth my size. I could take him with one hand.

So, I kept him down and spoke calmly to him and told him he was a good boy and that he

should relax. I gave him a soother and pounded gently on his back. He started to relax.

His eyes began to close. I removed my hand.

He promptly got to his feet. I was impressed. The kid had spirit! I lifted him up, and

laid him down, again. “Lie down, monster,” I said. I pounded his back gently some more.

Some kids find that soothing. He was getting tired. He was ready to capitulate. He closed

his eyes. I got to my feet, and headed quietly and quickly to the door. I glanced back, to

check his position, one last time. He was back on his feet. I pointed my finger at him.

“Down, monster,” I said, and I meant it. He went down like a shot. I closed the door. We

liked each other. Neither my wife nor I heard a peep out of him for the rest of the night.

“How was the kid?” his father asked me when he got home, much later that night.

“Good,” I said. “No problem at all. He’s asleep right now.”

“Did he get up?” said his father.

“No,” I said. “He slept the whole time.”

Dad looked at me. He wanted to know. But he didn’t ask. And I didn’t tell.

Don’t cast pearls before swine, as the old saying goes. And you might think that’s

harsh. But training your child not to sleep, and rewarding him with the antics of a creepy

puppet? That’s harsh too. You pick your poison, and I’ll pick mine.

Discipline and Punish

Modern parents are terrified of two frequently juxtaposed words: discipline and punish.

They evoke images of prisons, soldiers and jackboots. The distance between disciplinarian

and tyrant or punishment and torture is, indeed, easily traversed. *Discipline* and *punish*

must be handled with care. The fear is unsurprising. But both are necessary. They can be

applied unconsciously or consciously, badly or well, but there is no escaping their use.

It's not that it's impossible to discipline with reward. In fact, rewarding good behaviour

can be very effective. The most famous of all behavioural psychologists, B.F. Skinner, was

a great advocate of this approach. He was expert at it. He taught pigeons to play ping-

pong, although they only rolled the ball back and forth by pecking it with their beaks. 101

But they were pigeons. So even though they played badly, it was still pretty good. Skinner

even taught his birds to pilot missiles during the Second World War, in Project Pigeon

(later Orcon). 102 He got a long way, before the invention of electronic guidance systems

rendered his efforts obsolete.

Skinner observed the animals he was training to perform such acts with exceptional

care. Any actions that approximated what he was aiming at were immediately followed by

a reward of just the right size: not small enough to be inconsequential, and not so large

that it devalued future rewards. Such an approach can be used with children, and works

very well. Imagine that you would like your toddler to help set the table. It's a useful skill.

You'd like him better if he could do it. It would be good for his (shudder) self-esteem. So,

you break the target behaviour down into its component parts. One element of setting the

table is carrying a plate from the cupboard to the table. Even that might be too complex.

Perhaps your child has only been walking a few months. He's still wobbly and unreliable.

So, you start his training by handing him a plate and having him hand it back. A pat on

the head could follow. You might turn it into a game. Pass with your left. Switch to your

right. Circle around your back. Then you might give him a plate and take a few steps

backward so that he has to traverse a few steps before giving it back. Train him to become

a plate-handling virtuoso. Don’t leave him trapped in his klutz-dom.

You can teach virtually anyone anything with such an approach. First, figure out what

you want. Then, watch the people around you like a hawk. Finally, whenever you see

anything a bit more like what you want, swoop in (hawk, remember) and deliver a

reward. Your daughter has been very reserved since she became a teenager. You wish she

would talk more. That’s the target: more communicative daughter. One morning, over

breakfast, she shares an anecdote about school. That’s an excellent time to pay attention.

That’s the reward. Stop texting and listen. Unless you don’t want her to tell you anything

ever again.

Parental interventions that make children happy clearly can and should be used to

shape behaviour. The same goes for husbands, wives, co-workers and parents. Skinner,

however, was a realist. He noted that use of reward was very difficult: the observer had to

attend patiently until the target spontaneously manifested the desired behaviour, and

then reinforce. This required a lot of time, and a lot of waiting, and that’s a problem. He

also had to starve his animals down to three-quarters of their normal body weight before

they would become interested enough in food reward to truly pay attention. But these are

not the only shortcomings of the purely positive approach.

Negative emotions, like their positive counterparts, help us learn. We need to learn,

Negative emotions, like their positive counterparts, help us learn. We need to learn,

because we're stupid and easily damaged. We can die. That's not good, and we don't feel

good about it. If we did, we would seek death, and then we would die. We don't even feel

good about dying if it only *might* happen. And that's all the time. In that manner, negative

emotions, for all their unpleasantness, protect us. We feel hurt and scared and ashamed

and disgusted so we can avoid damage. And we're susceptible to feeling such things a lot.

In fact, we feel more negative about a loss of a given size than we feel good about the

same-sized gain. Pain is more potent than pleasure, and anxiety more than hope.

Emotions, positive and negative, come in two usefully differentiated variants.

Satisfaction (technically, satiation) tells us that what we did was good, while hope

(technically, incentive reward) indicates that something pleasurable is on the way. Pain

hurts us, so we won't repeat actions that produced personal damage or social isolation (as

loneliness is also, technically, a form of pain). Anxiety makes us stay away from hurtful

people and bad places so we don't have to feel pain. All these emotions must be balanced

against each other, and carefully judged in context, but they're all required to keep us

alive and thriving. We therefore do our children a disservice by failing to use whatever is

available to help them learn, including negative emotions, even though such use should

occur in the most merciful possible manner.

Skinner knew that threats and punishments could stop unwanted behaviours, just as

reward reinforces what is desirable. In a world paralyzed at the thought of interfering

with the hypothetically pristine path of natural child development, it can be difficult even

to discuss the former techniques. However, children would not have such a lengthy

period of natural development, prior to maturity, if their behaviour did not have to be

shaped. They would just leap out of the womb, ready to trade stocks. Children also

cannot be fully sheltered from fear and pain. They are small and vulnerable. They don't

know much about the world. Even when they are doing something as natural as learning

to walk, they're constantly being walloped by the world. And this is to say nothing of the

frustration and rejection they inevitably experience when dealing with siblings and peers

and uncooperative, stubborn adults. Given this, the fundamental moral question is not

how to shelter children completely from misadventure and failure, so they never

experience any fear or pain, but how to maximize their learning so that useful knowledge

may be gained with minimal cost.

In the Disney movie *Sleeping Beauty*, the King and Queen have a daughter, the princess

Aurora, after a long wait. They plan a great christening, to introduce her to the world.

They welcome everyone who loves and honours their new daughter. But they fail to invite

Maleficent (malicious, malevolent), who is essentially Queen of the Underworld, or

Nature in her negative guise. This means, symbolically, that the two monarchs are

overprotecting their beloved daughter, by setting up a world around her that has nothing

negative in it. But this does not protect her. It makes her weak. Maleficent curses the

princess, sentencing her to death at the age of sixteen, caused by the prick of a spinning

wheel's needle. The spinning wheel is the wheel of fate; the prick, which produces blood,

symbolizes the loss of virginity, a sign of the emergence of the woman from the child.

Fortunately, a good fairy (the positive element of Nature) reduces the punishment to

unconsciousness, redeemable with love's first kiss. The panicked King and Queen get rid

of all the spinning wheels in the land, and turn their daughter over to the much-too-nice

good fairies, of whom there are three. They continue with their strategy of removing all

dangerous things—but in doing so they leave their daughter naïve, immature and weak.

One day, just before Aurora's sixteenth birthday, she meets a prince in the forest, and

falls in love, the same day. By any reasonable standard, that's a bit much. Then she loudly

bemoans the fact that she is to be wed to Prince Philip, to whom she was betrothed as a

child, and collapses emotionally when she is brought back to her parents' castle for her

101

birthday. It is at that moment that Maleficent's curse manifests itself. A portal opens up

in the castle, a spinning wheel appears, and Aurora pricks her finger and falls

unconscious. She becomes Sleeping Beauty. In doing so (again, symbolically speaking)

she chooses unconsciousness over the terror of adult life. Something existentially similar

to this often occurs very frequently with overprotected children, who can be brought low

—and then desire the bliss of unconsciousness—by their first real contact with failure or,

worse, genuine malevolence, which they do not or will not understand and against which

they have no defence.

Take the case of the three-year-old who has not learned to share. She displays her

selfish behaviour in the presence of her parents, but they're too nice to intervene. More

truthfully, they refuse to pay attention, admit to what is happening, and teach her how to

act properly. They're annoyed, of course, when she won't share with her sister, but they

pretend everything is OK. It's not OK. They'll snap at her later, for something totally

unrelated. She will be hurt by that, and confused, but learn nothing. Worse: when she

tries to make friends, it won't go well, because of her lack of social sophistication.

Children her own age will be put off by her inability to cooperate. They'll fight with her,

or wander off and find someone else to play with. The parents of those children will

observe her awkwardness and misbehaviour, and won't invite her back to play with their

kids. She will be lonely and rejected. That will produce anxiety, depression and

resentment. That will produce the turning from life that is equivalent to the wish for

unconsciousness.

Parents who refuse to adopt the responsibility for disciplining their children think they

can just opt out of the conflict necessary for proper child-rearing. They avoid being the

bad guy (in the short term). But they do not at all rescue or protect their children from

fear and pain. Quite the contrary: the judgmental and uncaring broader social world will

mete out conflict and punishment far greater than that which would have been delivered

by an awake parent. You can discipline your children, or you can turn that responsibility

over to the harsh, uncaring judgmental world—and the motivation for the latter decision

should never be confused with love.

You might object, as modern parents sometimes do: why should a child even *be* subject

to the arbitrary dictates of a parent? In fact, there is a new variant of politically correct

thinking that presumes that such an idea is "adultism:" [103] a form of prejudice and

oppression analogous to, say, sexism or racism. The question of adult authority must be

answered with care. That requires a thorough examination of the question itself.

Accepting an objection as formulated is halfway to accepting its validity, and that can be

dangerous if the question is ill-posed. Let's break it down.

First, why should a child be *subject*? That's easy. Every child must listen to and obey

adults because he or she is dependent on the care that one or more imperfect grown-ups

is willing to bestow. Given this, it is better for the child to act in a manner that invites

genuine affection and goodwill. Something even better might be imagined. The child

could act in a manner that simultaneously ensures optimal adult attention, in a manner

that benefits his or her present state of being and future development. That's a very high

standard, but it's in the best interests of the child, so there is every reason to aspire to it.

Every child should also be taught to comply gracefully with the expectations of civil

society. This does not mean crushed into mindless ideological conformity. It means

instead that parents must reward those attitudes and actions that will bring their child

success in the world outside the family, and use threat and punishment when necessary

to eliminate behaviours that will lead to misery and failure. There's a tight window of

opportunity for this, as well, so getting it right quickly matters. If a child has not been

taught to behave properly by the age of four, it will forever be difficult for him or her to

make friends. The research literature is quite clear on this. This matters, because peers

are the primary source of socialization after the age of four. Rejected children cease to

develop, because they are alienated from their peers. They fall further and further behind,

as the other children continue to progress. Thus, the friendless child too often becomes

the lonely, antisocial or depressed teenager and adult. This is not good. Much more of our

sanity than we commonly realize is a consequence of our fortunate immersion in a social

community. We must be continually reminded to think and act properly. When we drift,

people that care for and love us nudge us in small ways and large back on track. So, we

better have some of those people around.

It's also not the case (back to the question) that adult dictates are all arbitrary. That's

only true in a dysfunctional totalitarian state. But in civilized, open societies, the majority

abide by a functional social contract, aimed at mutual betterment—or at least at existence

in close proximity without too much violence. Even a system of rules that allows for only

that minimum contract is by no means arbitrary, given the alternatives. If a society does

not adequately reward productive, pro-social behavior, insists upon distributing resources

in a markedly arbitrary and unfair manner, and allows for theft and exploitation, it will

not remain conflict-free for long. If its hierarchies are based only (or even primarily) on

power, instead of the competence necessary to get important and difficult things done, it

will be prone to collapse, as well. This is even true, in simpler form, of the hierarchies of

chimpanzees, which is an indication of its fundamental, biological and non-arbitrary

emergent truth.[104]

Poorly socialized children have terrible lives. Thus, it is better to socialize them

optimally. Some of this can be done with reward, but not all of it. The issue is therefore

not whether to use punishment and threat. The issue is whether to do it consciously and

thoughtfully. How, then, should children be disciplined? This is a very difficult question,

because children (and parents) differ vastly in their temperaments. Some children are

agreeable. They deeply want to please, but pay for that with a tendency to be conflict-

averse and dependent. Others are tougher-minded and more independent. Those kids

want to do what they want, when they want, all the time. They can be challenging, non-

compliant and stubborn. Some children are desperate for rules and structure, and are

content even in rigid environments. Others, with little regard for predictability and

routine, are immune to demands for even minimal necessary order. Some are wildly

imaginative and creative, and others more concrete and conservative. These are all deep,

important differences, heavily influenced by biological factors and difficult to modify

socially. It is fortunate indeed that in the face of such variability we are the beneficiaries

of much thoughtful meditation on the proper use of social control.

Minimum Necessary Force

Here's a straightforward initial idea: rules should not be multiplied beyond necessity.

Alternatively stated, bad laws drive out respect for good laws. This is the ethical—even

legal—equivalent of Occam's razor, the scientist's conceptual guillotine, which states that

the simplest possible hypothesis is preferable. So, don't encumber children —or their

disciplinarians—with too many rules. That path leads to frustration.

Limit the rules. Then, figure out what to do when one of them gets broken. A general,

context-independent rule for punishment severity is hard to establish. However, a helpful

norm has already been enshrined in English common law, one of the great products of

Western civilization. Its analysis can help us establish a second useful principle.

English common law allows you to defend your rights, but only in a reasonable manner.

Someone breaks into your house. You have a loaded pistol. You have a right to defend

yourself, but it's better to do it in stages. What if it's a drunk and confused neighbour?

"Shoot 'em!" you think. But it's not that simple. So, you say, instead, "Stop! I have a

gun." If that produces neither explanation nor retreat, you might consider a warning shot.

Then, if the perpetrator still advances, you might take aim at his leg. (Don't mistake any

of this for legal advice. It's an example.) A single brilliantly practical principle can be used

to generate all these incrementally more severe reactions: that of minimum necessary

force. So now we have two general principles of discipline. The first: limit the rules. The

second: Use the least force necessary to enforce those rules.

About the first principle, you might ask, “Limit the rules to what, exactly?” Here are

some suggestions. Do not bite, kick or hit, except in self-defence. Do not torture and

bully other children, so you don’t end up in jail. Eat in a civilized and thankful manner, so

that people are happy to have you at their house, and pleased to feed you. Learn to share,

so other kids will play with you. Pay attention when spoken to by adults, so they don’t

hate you and might therefore deign to teach you something. Go to sleep properly, and

peaceably, so that your parents can have a private life and not resent your existence. Take

care of your belongings, because you need to learn how and because you’re lucky to have

them. Be good company when something fun is happening, so that you’re invited for the

fun. Act so that other people are happy you’re around, so that people will want you

around. A child who knows these rules will be welcome everywhere.

About the second, equally important principle, your question might be: What is

minimum necessary force? This must be established experimentally, starting with the

smallest possible intervention. Some children will be turned to stone by a glare. A verbal

command will stop another. A thumb-cocked flick of the index finger on a small hand

might be necessary for some. Such a strategy is particularly useful in public places such as

restaurants. It can be administered suddenly, quietly and effectively, without risking

escalation. What's the alternative? A child who is crying angrily, demanding attention, is

not making himself popular. A child who is running from table to table and disrupting

everyone's peace is bringing disgrace (an old word, but a good one) on himself and his

parents. Such outcomes are far from optimal, and children will definitely misbehave more

in public, because they are experimenting: trying to establish if the same old rules also

apply in the new place. They don't sort that out verbally, not when they are under three.

When our children were little and we took them to restaurants, they attracted smiles.

They sat nicely and ate politely. They couldn't keep it up for long, but we didn't keep

them there too long. When they started to get antsy, after sitting for forty-five minutes,

we knew it was time to go. That was part of the deal. Nearby diners would tell us how

nice it was to see a happy family. We weren't always happy, and our children weren't

always properly behaved. But they were most of the time, and it was wonderful to see

people responding so positively to their presence. It was truly good for the kids. They

could see that people liked them. This also reinforced their good behaviour. That was the

reward.

People will really like your kids if you give them the chance. This is something I learned

as soon as we had our first baby, our daughter, Mikhaila. When we took her down the

street in her little foldup stroller in our French Montreal working-class neighbourhood,

rough-looking heavy-drinking lumberjack types would stop in their tracks and smile at

her. They would coo and giggle and make stupid faces. Watching people respond to

children restores your faith in human nature. All that's multiplied when your kids behave

in public. To ensure that such things happen, you have to discipline your children

carefully and effectively—and to do that, you have to know something about reward, and

about punishment, instead of shying away from the knowledge.

Part of establishing a relationship with your son or daughter is learning how that small

person responds to disciplinary intervention—and then intervening effectively. It's very

easy to mouth clichés instead, such as: "There is no excuse for physical punishment," or,

"Hitting children merely teaches them to hit." Let's start with the former claim: *there is no*

excuse for physical punishment. First, we should note the widespread consensus around the

idea that some forms of misbehavior, particularly those associated with theft and assault,

are both wrong and should be subject to sanction. Second, we should note that almost all

those sanctions involve punishment in its many psychological and more directly physical

forms. Deprivation of liberty causes pain in a manner essentially similar to that of

physical trauma. The same can be said of the use of social isolation (including time out).

We know this neurobiologically. The same brain areas mediate response to all three, and

all are ameliorated by the same class of drugs, opiates. 105 Jail is clearly physical

punishment—particularly solitary confinement—even when nothing violent happens.

Third, we should note that some misbegotten actions must be brought to a halt both

effectively and immediately, not least so that something worse doesn't happen. What's

the proper punishment for someone who will not stop poking a fork into an electrical

socket? Or who runs away laughing in a crowded supermarket parking lot? The answer is

simple: whatever will stop it fastest, within reason. Because the alternative could be fatal.

That's pretty obvious, in the case of parking lot or outlet. But the same thing applies in

the social realm, and that brings us to the fourth point regarding excuses for physical

punishment. The penalties for misbehavior (of the sort that could have been effectively

halted in childhood) become increasingly severe as children get older—and it is

disproportionately those who remain unsocialized effectively by age four who end up

punished explicitly by society in their later youth and early adulthood. Those

unconstrained four-year-olds, in turn, are often those who were unduly aggressive, by

nature, at age two. They were statistically more likely than their peers to kick, hit, bite

and take away toys (later known as stealing). They comprise about five per cent of boys,

and a much smaller percentage of girls. 106 To unthinkingly parrot the magic line "There is

no excuse for physical punishment" is also to foster the delusion that teenage devils

magically emerge from once-innocent little child-angels. You're not doing your child any

favors by overlooking any misbehavior (particularly if he or she is temperamentally more

aggressive).

To hold the *no excuse for physical punishment* theory is also (fifth) to assume that the

word *no* can be effectively uttered to another person in the absence of the threat of

punishment. A woman can say *no* to a powerful, narcissistic man only because she has

social norms, the law and the state backing her up. A parent can only say *no* to a child

who wants a third piece of cake because he or she is larger, stronger and more capable

than the child (and is additionally backed up in his authority by law and state). What *no*

means, in the final analysis, is always “If you continue to do that, something you do not

like will happen to you.” Otherwise it means nothing. Or, worse, it means “another

nonsensical nothing muttered by ignorable adults.” Or, worse still, it means, “all adults

are ineffectual and weak.” This is a particularly bad lesson, when every child’s destiny is

to become an adult, and when most things that are learned without undue personal pain

are modelled or explicitly taught by adults). What does a child who ignores adults and

holds them in contempt have to look forward to? Why grow up at all? And that’s the

story of Peter Pan, who thinks all adults are variants of Captain Hook, tyrannical and

terrified of his own mortality (think hungry crocodile with clock in his stomach). The

only time *no* ever means *no* in the absence of violence is when it is uttered by one civilized

person to another.

And what about the idea that *hitting a child merely teaches them to hit*? First: *No*. *Wrong*.

Too simple. For starters, “hitting” is a very unsophisticated word to describe the

disciplinary act of an effective parent. If “hitting” accurately described the entire range of

physical force, then there would be no difference between rain droplets and atom bombs.

Magnitude matters—and so does context, if we’re not being wilfully blind and naïve about

the issue. Every child knows the difference between being bitten by a mean, unprovoked

dog and being nipped by his own pet when he tries playfully but too carelessly to take its

bone. How hard someone is hit, and why they are hit, cannot merely be ignored when

speaking of hitting. Timing, part of context, is also of crucial importance. If you flick your

two-year-old with your finger just after he smacks the baby on the head with a wooden

block, he will get the connection, and be at least somewhat less willing to smack her

again in the future. That seems like a good outcome. He certainly won’t conclude that he

should hit her more, using the flick of his mother’s finger as an example. He’s not stupid.

He’s just jealous, impulsive and not very sophisticated. And how else are you going to

protect his younger sibling? If you discipline ineffectively, then the baby will suffer.

Maybe for years. The bullying will continue, because you won’t do a damn thing to stop

it. You’ll avoid the conflict that’s necessary to establish peace. You’ll turn a blind eye.

And then later, when the younger child confronts you (maybe even in adulthood), you’ll

say, “I never knew it was like that.” You just didn’t want to know. So, you didn’t. You just

rejected the responsibility of discipline, and justified it with a continual show of your

niceness. Every gingerbread house has a witch inside it that devours children.

So where does all that leave us? With the decision to discipline effectively, or to

discipline ineffectively (but never the decision to forego discipline altogether, because

nature and society will punish in a draconian manner whatever errors of childhood

behavior remain uncorrected). So here are a few practical hints: time out can be an

extremely effective form of punishment, particularly if the misbehaving child is welcome

as soon as he controls his temper. An angry child should sit by himself until he calms

down. Then he should be allowed to return to normal life. That means the child wins—

instead of his anger. The rule is “Come be with us as soon as you can behave properly.”

This is a very good deal for child, parent and society. You’ll be able to tell if your child has

really regained control. You’ll like him again, despite his earlier misbehaviour. If you’re

still mad, maybe he hasn’t completely repented—or maybe you should do something

about your tendency to hold a grudge.

If your child is the kind of determined varmint who simply runs away, laughing, when

placed on the steps or in his room, physical restraint might have to be added to the time

out routine. A child can be held carefully but firmly by the upper arms, until he or she

stops squirming and pays attention. If that fails, being turned over a parent’s knee might

be required. For the child who is pushing the limits in a spectacularly inspired way, a

swat across the backside can indicate requisite seriousness on the part of a responsible

adult. There are some situations in which even that will not suffice, partly because some

children are very determined, exploratory, and tough, or because the offending behaviour

is truly severe. And if you're not thinking such things through, then you're not acting

responsibly as a parent. You're leaving the dirty work to someone else, who will be much

dirtier doing it.

A Summary of Principles

Disciplinary principle 1: *limit the rules*. Principle 2: *use minimum necessary force*. Here's a

third: *parents should come in pairs*. 107 Raising young children is demanding and exhausting.

Because of this, it's easy for a parent to make a mistake. Insomnia, hunger, the aftermath

of an argument, a hangover, a bad day at work—any of these things singly can make a

person unreasonable, while in combination they can produce someone dangerous. Under

such circumstances, it is necessary to have someone else around, to observe, and step in,

and discuss. This will make it less likely that a whiny provocative child and her fed-up

cranky parent will excite each other to the point of no return. Parents should come in

pairs so the father of a newborn can watch the new mother so she won't get worn out and

do something desperate after hearing her colicky baby wail from eleven in the evening

106

until five in the morning for thirty nights in a row. I am not saying we should be mean to

single mothers, many of whom struggle impossibly and courageously—and a proportion

of whom have had to escape, singly, from a brutal relationship—but that doesn't mean we

should pretend that all family forms are equally viable. They're not. Period.

Here's a fourth principle, one that is more particularly psychological *: parents should*

understand their own capacity to be harsh, vengeful, arrogant, resentful, angry and deceitful. Very

few people set out, consciously, to do a terrible job as father or mother, but bad parenting

happens all the time. This is because people have a great capacity for evil, as well as good

—and because they remain willfully blind to that fact. People are aggressive and selfish, as

well as kind and thoughtful. For this reason, no adult human being—no hierarchical,

predatory ape—can truly tolerate being dominated by an upstart child. Revenge will come.

Ten minutes after a pair of all-too-nice-and-patient parents have failed to prevent a public

tantrum at the local supermarket, they will pay their toddler back with the cold shoulder

when he runs up, excited, to show mom and dad his newest accomplishment. Enough

embarrassment, disobedience, and dominance challenge, and even the most

hypothetically selfless parent will become resentful. And then the real punishment will

begin. Resentment breeds the desire for vengeance. Fewer spontaneous offers of love will

be offered, with more rationalizations for their absence. Fewer opportunities for the

personal development of the child will be sought out. A subtle turning away will begin.

And this is only the beginning of the road to total familial warfare, conducted mostly in

the underworld, underneath the false façade of normality and love.

This frequently-travelled path is much better avoided. A parent who is seriously aware

of his or her limited tolerance and capacity for misbehaviour when provoked can therefore

seriously plan a proper disciplinary strategy—particularly if monitored by an equally

awake partner—and never let things degenerate to the point where genuine hatred

emerges. Beware. There are toxic families everywhere. They make no rules and limit no

misbehaviour. The parents lash out randomly and unpredictably. The children live in that

chaos and are crushed, if they're timid, or rebel, counterproductively, if they're tough. It's

not good. It can get murderous.

Here's a fifth and final and most general principle. Parents have a duty to act as proxies

for the real world—merciful proxies, caring proxies—but proxies, nonetheless. This

obligation supersedes any responsibility to ensure happiness, foster creativity, or boost

self-esteem. It is the primary duty of parents to make their children socially desirable.

That will provide the child with opportunity, self-regard, and security. It's more important

even than fostering individual identity. That Holy Grail can only be pursued, in any case,

after a high degree of social sophistication has been established.

The Good Child—and the Responsible Parent

A properly socialized three-year-old is polite and engaging. She's also no pushover. She

evokes interest from other children and appreciation from adults. She exists in a world

where other kids welcome her and compete for her attention, and where adults are happy

to see her, instead of hiding behind false smiles. She will be introduced to the world by

people who are pleased to do so. This will do more for her eventual individuality than any

cowardly parental attempt to avoid day-to-day conflict and discipline.

Discuss your likes and dislikes with regards to your children with your partner or,

failing that, a friend. But do not be afraid to have likes and dislikes. You can judge

suitable from unsuitable, and wheat from chaff. You realize the difference between good

and evil. Having clarified your stance—having assessed yourself for pettiness, arrogance

and resentment—you take the next step, and you make your children behave. You take

responsibility for their discipline. You take responsibility for the mistakes you will

inevitably make while disciplining. You can apologize, when you’re wrong, and learn to

do better.

You love your kids, after all. If their actions make you dislike them, think what an effect

they will have on other people, who care much less about them than you. Those other

people will punish them, severely, by omission or commission. Don't allow that to

happen. Better to let your little monsters know what is desirable and what is not, so they

become sophisticated denizens of the world outside the family.

A child who pays attention, instead of drifting, and can play, and does not whine, and is

comical, but not annoying, and is trustworthy—that child will have friends wherever he

goes. His teachers will like him, and so will his parents. If he attends politely to adults, he

will be attended to, smiled at and happily instructed. He will thrive, in what can so easily

be a cold, unforgiving and hostile world. Clear rules make for secure children and calm,

rational parents. Clear principles of discipline and punishment balance mercy and justice

so that social development and psychological maturity can be optimally promoted. Clear

rules and proper discipline help the child, and the family, and society, establish, maintain

and expand the order that is all that protects us from chaos and the terrors of the

underworld, where everything is uncertain, anxiety-provoking, hopeless and depressing.

There are no greater gifts that a committed and courageous parent can bestow.

Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.

109

110

111

R U L E 6

SET YOUR HOUSE IN PERFECT ORDER BEFORE YOU

CRITICIZE THE WORLD

A RELIGIOUS PROBLEM

It does not seem reasonable to describe the young man who shot twenty children and six

staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012 as a

religious person. This is equally true for the Colorado theatre gunman and the Columbine

High School killers. But these murderous individuals had a problem with reality that

existed at a religious depth. As one of the members of the Columbine duo wrote:[108]

The human race isn't worth fighting for, only worth killing. Give the Earth back to the animals. They deserve it

infinitely more than we do. Nothing means anything anymore .

People who think such things view Being itself as inequitable and harsh to the point of

corruption, and *human* Being, in particular, as contemptible. They appoint themselves

supreme adjudicators of reality and find it wanting. They are the ultimate critics. The

deeply cynical writer continues:

If you recall your history, the Nazis came up with a “final solution” to the Jewish problem.… Kill them all. Well,

in case you haven’t figured it out, I say “KILL MANKIND.” No one should survive .

For such individuals, the world of experience is insufficient and evil—so to hell with

everything!

What is happening when someone comes to think in this manner? A great German

play, *Faust: A Tragedy*, written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, addresses that issue. The

play’s main character, a scholar named Heinrich Faust, trades his immortal soul to the

devil, Mephistopheles. In return, he receives whatever he desires while still alive on

Earth. In Goethe’s play, Mephistopheles is the eternal adversary of Being. He has a

central, defining credo:109

I am the spirit who negates

and rightly so, for all that comes to be

deserves to perish, wretchedly.

It were better nothing would begin!

Thus everything that your terms sin,

destruction, evil represent—

that is my proper element.

Goethe considered this hateful sentiment so important—so key to the central element of

vengeful human destructiveness—that he had Mephistopheles say it a second time,

phrased somewhat differently, in Part II of the play, written many years later.[110]

People think often in the Mephistophelean manner, although they seldom act upon

their thoughts as brutally as the mass murderers of school, college and theatre. Whenever

we experience injustice, real or imagined; whenever we encounter tragedy or fall prey to

the machinations of others; whenever we experience the horror and pain of our own

apparently arbitrary limitations—the temptation to question Being and then to curse it

rises foully from the darkness. Why must innocent people suffer so terribly? What kind of

bloody, horrible planet is this, anyway?

Life is in truth very hard. Everyone is destined for pain and slated for destruction.

Sometimes suffering is clearly the result of a personal fault such as willful blindness, poor

decision-making or malevolence. In such cases, when it appears to be self-inflicted, it may

even seem just. People get what they deserve, you might contend. That's cold comfort,

112

however, even when true. Sometimes, if those who are suffering changed their behaviour,

then their lives would unfold less tragically. But human control is limited. Susceptibility

to despair, disease, aging and death is universal. In the final analysis, we do not appear to

be the architects of our own fragility. Whose fault is it, then?

People who are very ill (or, worse, who have a sick child) will inevitably find

themselves asking this question, whether they are religious believers or not. The same is

true of someone who finds his shirtsleeve caught in the gears of a giant bureaucracy—

who is suffering through a tax audit, or fighting an interminable lawsuit or divorce. And

it's not only the obviously suffering who are tormented by the need to blame someone or

something for the intolerable state of their Being. At the height of his fame, influence and

creative power, for example, the towering Leo Tolstoy himself began to question the value

of human existence. 111 He reasoned in this way:

My position was terrible. I knew that I could find nothing in the way of rational knowledge except a denial of

life; and in faith I could find nothing except a denial of reason, and this was even more impossible than a denial

of life. According to rational knowledge, it followed that life is evil, and people know it. They do not have to

live, yet they have lived and they do live, just as I myself had lived, even though I had known for a long time

that life is meaningless and evil.

Try as he might, Tolstoy could identify only four means of escaping from such thoughts.

One was retreating into childlike ignorance of the problem. Another was pursuing

mindless pleasure. The third was "continuing to drag out a life that is evil and

meaningless, knowing beforehand that nothing can come of it." He identified that

particular form of escape with weakness: "The people in this category know that death is

better than life, but they do not have the strength to act rationally and quickly put an end

to the delusion by killing themselves…."

Only the fourth and final mode of escape involved "strength and energy. It consists of

destroying life, once one has realized that life is evil and meaningless." Tolstoy

relentlessly followed his thoughts:

Only unusually strong and logically consistent people act in this manner. Having realized all the stupidity of the

joke that is being played on us and seeing that the blessings of the dead are greater than those of the living and

that it is better not to exist, they act and put an end to this stupid joke; and they use any means of doing it: a

rope around the neck, water, a knife in the heart, a train.

Tolstoy wasn't pessimistic enough. The stupidity of the joke being played on us does not

merely motivate suicide. It motivates murder—mass murder, often followed by suicide.

That is a far more effective existential protest. By June of 2016, unbelievable as it may

seem, there had been one thousand mass killings (defined as four or more people shot in

a single incident, excluding the shooter) in the US in twelve hundred and sixty days. 112

That's one such event on five of every six days for more than three years. Everyone says,

"We don't understand." How can we still pretend that? Tolstoy understood, more than a

century ago. The ancient authors of the biblical story of Cain and Abel understood, as

well, more than twenty centuries ago. They described murder as the first act of post-

Edenic history: and not just murder, but fratricidal murder—murder not only of someone

innocent but of someone ideal and good, and murder done consciously to spite the creator

of the universe. Today's killers tell us the same thing, in their own words. Who would

dare say that this is not the worm at the core of the apple? But we will not listen, because

the truth cuts too close to the bone. Even for a mind as profound as that of the celebrated

Russian author, there was no way out. How can the rest of us manage, when a man of

Tolstoy's stature admits defeat? For years, he hid his guns from himself and would not

walk with a rope in hand, in case he hanged himself.

How can a person who is awake avoid outrage at the world?

Vengeance or Transformation

A religious man might shake his fist in desperation at the apparent injustice and

blindness of God. Even Christ Himself felt abandoned before the cross, or so the story

goes. A more agnostic or atheistic individual might blame fate, or meditate bitterly on the

brutality of chance. Another might tear himself apart, searching for the character flaws

underlying his suffering and deterioration. These are all variations on a theme. The name

of the target changes, but the underlying psychology remains constant. Why? Why is

there so much suffering and cruelty?

Well, perhaps it really is God's doing—or the fault of blind, pointless fate, if you are

inclined to think that way. And there appears to be every reason to think that way. But,

what happens if you do? Mass murderers believe that the suffering attendant upon

existence justifies judgment and revenge, as the Columbine boys so clearly indicated:[113]

I will sooner die than betray my own thoughts. Before I leave this worthless place, I will kill who ever I deem

unfit for anything, especially life. If you pissed me off in the past, you will die if I see you. You might be able to

piss off others, and have it eventually all blow over, but not me. I don't forget people who wronged me.

One of the most vengeful murderers of the twentieth century, the terrible Carl Panzram,

was raped, brutalized and betrayed in the Minnesota institution responsible for his

“rehabilitation” when he was a delinquent juvenile. He emerged, enraged beyond

measure, as burglar, arsonist, rapist and serial killer. He aimed consciously and

consistently at destruction, even keeping track of the dollar value of the property he

burned. He started by hating the individuals who had hurt him. His resentment grew,

until his hatred encompassed all of mankind, and he didn’t stop there. His

destructiveness was aimed in some fundamental manner at God Himself. There is no

other way of phrasing it. Panzram raped, murdered and burned to express his outrage at

Being. He acted as if Someone was responsible. The same thing happens in the story of

Cain and Abel. Cain’s sacrifices are rejected. He exists in suffering. He calls out God and

challenges the Being He created. God refuses his plea. He tells Cain that his trouble is

self-induced. Cain, in his rage, kills Abel, God’s favourite (and, truth be known, Cain’s

idol). Cain is jealous, of course, of his successful brother. But he destroys Abel primarily

to spite God. This is the truest version of what happens when people take their vengeance

to the ultimate extreme.

Panzram's response was (and this is what was so terrible) perfectly understandable.

The details of his autobiography reveal that he was one of Tolstoy's strong and logically

consistent people. He was a powerful, consistent, fearless actor. He had the courage of his

convictions. How could someone like him be expected to forgive and forget, given what

had happened to him? Truly terrible things happen to people. It's no wonder they're out

for revenge. Under such conditions, vengeance seems a moral necessity. How can it be

distinguished from the demand for justice? After the experience of terrible atrocity, isn't

forgiveness just cowardice, or lack of willpower? Such questions torment me. But people

emerge from terrible pasts to do good, and not evil, although such an accomplishment can

seem superhuman.

I have met people who managed to do it. I know a man, a great artist, who emerged

from just such a "school" as the one described by Panzram—only this man was thrown

into it as an innocent five-year-old, fresh from a long stretch in a hospital, where he had

suffered measles, mumps and chicken pox, simultaneously. Incapable of speaking the

language of the school, deliberately isolated from his family, abused, starved and

otherwise tormented, he emerged an angry, broken young man. He hurt himself badly in

the aftermath with drugs and alcohol and other forms of self-destructive behaviour. He

detested everyone—God, himself and blind fate included. But he put an end to all of that.

He stopped drinking. He stopped hating (although it still emerges in flashes). He

revitalized the artistic culture of his Native tradition, and trained young men to continue

in his footsteps. He produced a fifty-foot totem pole memorializing the events of his life,

and a canoe, forty feet long, from a single log, of a kind rarely if ever produced now. He

brought his family together, and held a great potlatch, with sixteen hours of dancing and

hundreds of people in attendance, to express his grief, and make peace with the past. He

decided to be a good person, and then did the impossible things required to live that way.

I had a client who did not have good parents. Her mother died when she was very

young. Her grandmother, who raised her, was a harridan, bitter and over-concerned with

appearances. She mistreated her granddaughter, punishing her for her virtues: creativity,

sensitivity, intelligence—unable to resist acting out her resentment for an admittedly hard

life on her granddaughter. She had a better relationship with her father, but he was an

addict who died, badly, while she cared for him. My client had a son. She perpetuated

none of this with him. He grew up truthful, and independent, and hard-working, and

smart. Instead of widening the tear in the cultural fabric she inherited, and transmitting

it, she sewed it up. She rejected the sins of her forefathers. Such things can be done.

Distress, whether psychic, physical, or intellectual, need not at all produce nihilism (that is, the radical rejection

of value, meaning and desirability). Such distress always permits a variety of interpretations.

Nietzsche wrote those words.[114] What he meant was this: people who experience evil

may certainly desire to perpetuate it, to pay it forward. But it is also possible to learn

good by experiencing evil. A bullied boy can mimic his tormentors. But he can also learn

from his own abuse that it is wrong to push people around and make their lives

miserable. Someone tormented by her mother can learn from her terrible experiences how

important it is to be a good parent. Many, perhaps even most, of the adults who abuse

children were abused themselves as children. However, the majority of people who were

abused as children do not abuse their own children. This is a well-established fact, which

can be demonstrated, simply, arithmetically, in this way: if one parent abused three

children, and each of those children had three children, and so on, then there would be

three abusers the first generation, nine the second, twenty-seven the third, eighty-one the

fourth—and so on exponentially. After twenty generations, more than ten billion would

have suffered childhood abuse: more people than currently inhabit the planet. But

instead, abuse disappears across generations. People constrain its spread. That's a

testament to the genuine dominance of good over evil in the human heart.

The desire for vengeance, however justified, also bars the way to other productive

thoughts. The American/English poet T. S. Eliot explained why, in his play, *The Cocktail*

Party. One of his characters is not having a good time of it. She speaks of her profound

unhappiness to a psychiatrist. She says she hopes that all her suffering is her own fault.

The psychiatrist is taken aback. He asks why. She has thought long and hard about this,

she says, and has come to the following conclusion: if it's her fault, she might be able to

do something about it. If it's God's fault, however—if reality itself is flawed, hell-bent on

ensuring her misery—then she is doomed. She couldn't change the structure of reality

itself. But maybe she could change her own life.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had every reason to question the structure of existence when

he was imprisoned in a Soviet labour camp, in the middle of the terrible twentieth

century. He had served as a soldier on the ill-prepared Russian front lines in the face of a

Nazi invasion. He had been arrested, beaten and thrown into prison by his own people.

Then he was struck by cancer. He could have become resentful and bitter. His life had

been rendered miserable by both Stalin and Hitler, two of the worst tyrants in history. He

lived in brutal conditions. Vast stretches of his precious time were stolen from him and

squandered. He witnessed the pointless and degrading suffering and death of his friends

and acquaintances. Then he contracted an extremely serious disease. Solzhenitsyn had

cause to curse God. Job himself barely had it as hard.

But the great writer, the profound, spirited defender of truth, did not allow his mind to

turn towards vengeance and destruction. He opened his eyes, instead. During his many

trials, Solzhenitsyn encountered people who comported themselves nobly, under horrific

circumstances. He contemplated their behaviour deeply. Then he asked himself the most

difficult of questions: had he personally contributed to the catastrophe of his life? If so,

how? He remembered his unquestioning support of the Communist Party in his early

years. He reconsidered his whole life. He had plenty of time in the camps. How had he

missed the mark, in the past? How many times had he acted against his own conscience,

engaging in actions that he knew to be wrong? How many times had he betrayed himself,

and lied? Was there any way that the sins of his past could be rectified, atoned for, in the

muddy hell of a Soviet gulag?

Solzhenitsyn pored over the details of his life, with a fine-toothed comb. He asked

himself a second question, and a third. Can I stop making such mistakes, now? Can I

repair the damage done by my past failures, now? He learned to watch and to listen. He

found people he admired; who were honest, despite everything. He took himself apart,

piece by piece, let what was unnecessary and harmful die, and resurrected himself. Then

he wrote *The Gulag Archipelago*, a history of the Soviet prison camp system. 115 It's a forceful, terrible book, written with the overwhelming moral force of unvarnished truth.

Its sheer outrage screamed unbearably across hundreds of pages. Banned (and for good

reason) in the USSR, it was smuggled to the West in the 1970s, and burst upon the

world. Solzhenitsyn's writing utterly and finally demolished the intellectual credibility of

communism, as ideology or society. He took an axe to the trunk of the tree whose bitter

fruits had nourished him so poorly—and whose planting he had witnessed and supported.

One man's decision to change his life, instead of cursing fate, shook the whole

pathological system of communist tyranny to its core. It crumbled entirely, not so many

years later, and Solzhenitsyn's courage was not the least of the reasons why. He was not

the only such person to perform such a miracle. Václav Havel, the persecuted writer who

later, impossibly, became the president of Czechoslovakia, then of the new Czech

Republic, comes to mind, as does Mahatma Gandhi.

Things Fall Apart

Whole peoples have adamantly refused to judge reality, to criticize Being, to blame God.

It's interesting to consider the Old Testament Hebrews in this regard. Their travails

followed a consistent pattern. The stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and Noah

and the Tower of Babel are truly ancient. Their origins vanish into the mysteries of time.

It's not until after the flood story in Genesis that something like history, as we

understand it, truly starts. It starts with Abraham. Abraham's descendants become the

Hebrew people of the Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew Bible. They enter a

covenant with Yahweh—with God—and begin their recognizably historical adventures.

Under the leadership of a great man, the Hebrews organize themselves into a society,

and then an empire. As their fortunes rise, success breeds pride and arrogance.

Corruption raises its ugly head. The increasingly hubristic state becomes obsessed with

power, begins to forget its duty to the widows and orphans, and deviates from its age-old

agreement with God. A prophet arises. He brazenly and publicly reviles the authoritarian

king and faithless country for their failures before God—an act of blind courage—telling

them of the terrible judgment to come. When his wise words are not completely ignored,

they are heeded too late. God smites his wayward people, dooming them to abject defeat

in battle and generations of subjugation. The Hebrews repent, at length, blaming their

misfortune on their own failure to adhere to God's word. They insist to themselves that

they could have done better. They rebuild their state, and the cycle begins again.

This is life. We build structures to live in. We build families, and states, and countries.

We abstract the principles upon which those structures are founded and formulate

systems of belief. At first we inhabit those structures and beliefs like Adam and Eve in

Paradise. But success makes us complacent. We forget to pay attention. We take what we

have for granted. We turn a blind eye. We fail to notice that things are changing, or that

corruption is taking root. And everything falls apart. Is that the fault of reality—of God?

Or do things fall apart because we have not paid sufficient attention?

When the hurricane hit New Orleans, and the town sank under the waves, was that a

natural disaster? The Dutch prepare their dikes for the worst storm in ten thousand years.

Had New Orleans followed that example, no tragedy would have occurred. It’s not that no

one knew. The Flood Control Act of 1965 mandated improvements in the levee system

that held back Lake Pontchartrain. The system was to be completed by 1978. Forty years

later, only 60 percent of the work had been done. Willful blindness and corruption took

the city down.

A hurricane is an act of God. But failure to prepare, when the necessity for preparation

is well known—that's sin. That's failure to hit the mark. And the wages of sin is death

(Romans 6:23). The ancient Jews always blamed themselves when things fell apart. They

acted as if God's goodness—the goodness of reality—was axiomatic, and took

responsibility for their own failure. That's insanely responsible. But the alternative is to

judge reality as insufficient, to criticize Being itself, and to sink into resentment and the

desire for revenge.

If you are suffering—well, that's the norm. People are limited and life is tragic. If your

suffering is unbearable, however, and you are starting to become corrupted, here's

something to think about.

Clean Up Your Life

Consider your circumstances. Start small. Have you taken full advantage of the

opportunities offered to you? Are you working hard on your career, or even your job, or

are you letting bitterness and resentment hold you back and drag you down? Have you

made peace with your brother? Are you treating your spouse and your children with

dignity and respect? Do you have habits that are destroying your health and well-being?

Are you truly shouldering your responsibilities? Have you said what you need to say to

your friends and family members? Are there things that you could do, that you know you

could do, that would make things around you better?

Have you cleaned up your life?

If the answer is no, here's something to try: *Start to stop doing what you know to be wrong*.

Start stopping today . Don't waste time questioning how you know that what you're doing

is wrong, if you are certain that it is. Inopportune questioning can confuse, without

enlightening, as well as deflecting you from action. You can know that something is

wrong or right without knowing why. Your entire Being can tell you something that you

can neither explain nor articulate. Every person is too complex to know themselves

completely, and we all contain wisdom that we cannot comprehend.

So, simply stop, when you apprehend, however dimly, that you should stop. Stop acting

in that particular, despicable manner. Stop saying those things that make you weak and

ashamed. Say only those things that make you strong. Do only those things that you

could speak of with honour.

You can use your own standards of judgment. You can rely on yourself for guidance.

You don’t have to adhere to some external, arbitrary code of behaviour (although you

should not overlook the guidelines of your culture. Life is short, and you don’t have time

to figure everything out on your own. The wisdom of the past was hard-earned, and your

dead ancestors may have something useful to tell you).

Don’t blame capitalism, the radical left, or the iniquity of your enemies. Don’t

Don’t blame capitalism, the radical left, or the iniquity of your enemies. Don’t

reorganize the state until you have ordered your own experience. Have some humility. If

you cannot bring peace to your household, how dare you try to rule a city? Let your own

soul guide you. Watch what happens over the days and weeks. When you are at work you

will begin to say what you really think. You will start to tell your wife, or your husband,

or your children, or your parents, what you really want and need. When you know that

you have left something undone, you will act to correct the omission. Your head will start

to clear up, as you stop filling it with lies. Your experience will improve, as you stop

distorting it with inauthentic actions. You will then begin to discover new, more subtle

things that you are doing wrong. Stop doing those, too. After some months and years of

diligent effort, your life will become simpler and less complicated. Your judgment will

improve. You will untangle your past. You will become stronger and less bitter. You will

move more confidently into the future. You will stop making your life unnecessarily

difficult. You will then be left with the inevitable bare tragedies of life, but they will no

longer be compounded with bitterness and deceit.

Perhaps you will discover that your now less-corrupted soul, much stronger than it

might otherwise have been, is now able to bear those remaining, necessary, minimal,

inescapable tragedies. Perhaps you will even learn to encounter them so that they stay

tragic—merely tragic—instead of degenerating into outright hellishness. Maybe your

anxiety, and hopelessness, and resentment, and anger—however murderous, initially—

will recede. Perhaps your uncorrupted soul will then see its existence as a genuine good,

as something to celebrate, even in the face of your own vulnerability. Perhaps you will

become an ever-more-powerful force for peace and whatever is good.

Perhaps you will then see that if all people did this, in their own lives, the world might

stop being an evil place. After that, with continued effort, perhaps it could even stop

being a tragic place. Who knows what existence might be like if we all decided to strive

for the best? Who knows what eternal heavens might be established by our spirits,

purified by truth, aiming skyward, right here on the fallen Earth?

Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.

R U L E 7

PURSUE WHAT IS MEANINGFUL (NOT WHAT IS EXPEDIENT)

GET WHILE THE GETTING'S GOOD

Life is suffering. That's clear. There is no more basic, irrefutable truth. It's basically what

God tells Adam and Eve, immediately before he kicks them out of Paradise.

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth

children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree,

of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt

thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken;

for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:16-19. KJV)

What in the world should be done about that?

The simplest, most obvious, and most direct answer? Pursue pleasure. Follow your

impulses. Live for the moment. Do what's expedient. Lie, cheat, steal, deceive,

manipulate—but don't get caught. In an ultimately meaningless universe, what possible

difference could it make? And this is by no means a new idea. The fact of life's tragedy

and the suffering that is part of it has been used to justify the pursuit of immediate selfish

gratification for a very long time.

Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a man comes to his end, and no one has been

known to return from Hades.

Because we were born by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been; because the

breath in our nostrils is smoke, and reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts.

When it is extinguished, the body will turn to ashes, and the spirit will dissolve like empty air. Our name will

be forgotten in time and no one will remember our works; our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and

be scattered like mist that is chased by the rays of the sun and overcome by its heat.

For our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from our death, because it is sealed up

and no one turns back.

Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that exist, and make use of the creation to the full as in youth.

Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no flower of spring pass by us.

Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither.

Let none of us fail to share in our revelry, everywhere let us leave signs of enjoyment, because this is our

portion, and this our lot.

Let us oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow nor regard the gray hairs of the aged.

But let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless. (Wisdom 2:1-11, RSV).

The pleasure of expediency may be fleeting, but it's pleasure, nonetheless, and that's

something to stack up against the terror and pain of existence. Every man for himself, and

the devil take the hindmost, as the old proverb has it. Why not simply take everything

you can get, whenever the opportunity arises? Why not determine to live in that manner?

Or is there an alternative, more powerful and more compelling?

Our ancestors worked out very sophisticated answers to such questions, but we still

don't understand them very well. This is because they are in large part still implicit—

manifest primarily in ritual and myth and, as of yet, incompletely articulated. We act

them out and represent them in stories, but we're not yet wise enough to formulate them

explicitly. We're still chimps in a troupe, or wolves in a pack. We know how to behave.

We know who's who, and why. We've learned that through experience. Our knowledge

has been shaped by our interaction with others. We've established predictable routines

and patterns of behavior—but we don't really understand them, or know where they

originated. They've evolved over great expanses of time. No one was formulating them

explicitly (at least not in the dimmest reaches of the past), even though we've been telling

each other how to act forever. One day, however, not so long ago, we woke up. We were

already doing, but we started *noticing* what we were doing. We started using our bodies as

devices to represent their own actions. We started imitating and dramatizing. We

invented ritual. We started acting out our own experiences. Then we started to tell

stories. We coded our observations of our own drama in these stories. In this manner, the

information that was first only embedded in our behaviour became represented in our

stories. But we didn't and still don't understand what it all means.

The Biblical narrative of Paradise and the Fall is one such story, fabricated by our

collective imagination, working over the centuries. It provides a profound account of the

nature of Being, and points the way to a mode of conceptualization and action well-

matched to that nature. In the Garden of Eden, prior to the dawn of self-consciousness—

so goes the story—human beings were sinless. Our primordial parents, Adam and Eve,

walked with God. Then, tempted by the snake, the first couple ate from the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil, discovered Death and vulnerability, and turned away from

God. Mankind was exiled from Paradise, and began its effortful mortal existence. The idea

of sacrifice enters soon afterward, beginning with the account of Cain and Abel, and

developing through the Abrahamic adventures and the Exodus: After much

contemplation, struggling humanity learns that God's favour could be gained, and his

wrath averted, through proper sacrifice—and, also, that bloody murder might be

motivated among those unwilling or unable to succeed in this manner.

The Delay of Gratification

When engaging in sacrifice, our forefathers began to act out what would be considered a

proposition, if it were stated in words: *that something better might be attained in the future by*

giving up something of value in the present. Recall, if you will, that the necessity for work is

one of the curses placed by God upon Adam and his descendants in consequence of

Original Sin. Adam's waking to the fundamental constraints of his Being—his

vulnerability, his eventual death—is equivalent to his discovery of the future. The future:

that's where you go to die (hopefully, not too soon). Your demise might be staved off

through work; through the sacrifice of the *now* to gain benefit *later*. It is for this reason—

among others, no doubt—that the concept of sacrifice is introduced in the Biblical chapter

immediately following the drama of the Fall. There is little difference between sacrifice

and work. They are also both uniquely human. Sometimes, animals act as if they are

working, but they are really only following the dictates of their nature. Beavers build

dams. They do so because they are beavers, and beavers build dams. They don't think,

"Yeah, but I'd rather be on a beach in Mexico with my girlfriend," while they're doing it.

Prosaically, such sacrifice—work—is delay of gratification, but that's a very mundane

phrase to describe something of such profound significance. The discovery that

gratification could be delayed was simultaneously the discovery of time and, with it,

causality (at least the causal force of voluntary human action). Long ago, in the dim mists

of time, *we began to realize that reality was structured as if it could be bargained with.* We

learned that behaving properly now, in the present—regulating our impulses, considering

the plight of others—could bring rewards in the future, in a time and place that did not

yet exist. We began to inhibit, control and organize our immediate impulses, so that we

could stop interfering with other people and our future selves. Doing so was

indistinguishable from organizing society: the discovery of the causal relationship

between our efforts today and the quality of tomorrow motivated the social contract—the

organization that enables today's work to be stored, reliably (mostly in the form of

promises from others).

Understanding is often acted out before it can be articulated (just as a child acts out

Understanding is often acted out before it can be articulated (just as a child acts out

what it means to be "mother" or "father" before being able to give a spoken account of

what those roles mean). 116 The act of making a ritual sacrifice to God was an early and

sophisticated enactment of the idea of the usefulness of delay. There is a long conceptual

journey between merely feasting hungrily and learning to set aside some extra meat,

smoked by the fire, for the end of the day, or for someone who isn't present. It takes a

long time to learn to keep anything later for yourself, or to share it with someone else

(and those are very much the same thing as, in the former case, you are sharing with your

future self). It is much easier and far more likely to selfishly and immediately wolf down

everything in sight. There are similar long journeys between every leap in sophistication

with regard to delay and its conceptualization: short-term sharing, storing away for the

future, representation of that storage in the form of records and, later, in the form of

currency—and, ultimately, the saving of money in a bank or other social institution. Some

conceptualizations had to serve as intermediaries, or the full range of our practices and

ideas surrounding sacrifice and work and their representation could have never emerged.

Our ancestors acted out a drama, a fiction: they personified the force that governs fate

as a spirit that can be bargained with, traded with, as if it were another human being. And

the amazing thing is *that it worked*. This was in part because the future is largely

composed of other human beings—often precisely those who have watched and evaluated

and appraised the tiniest details of your past behavior. It's not very far from that to God,

sitting above on high, tracking your every move and writing it down for further reference

in a big book. Here's a productive symbolic idea: *the future is a judgmental father*. That's a

good start. But two additional, archetypal, foundational questions arose, because of the

discovery of sacrifice, of work. Both have to do with the ultimate extension of the logic of

work—which is *sacrifice now, to gain later*.

First question. What must be sacrificed? Small sacrifices may be sufficient to solve

small, singular problems. But it is possible that larger, more comprehensive sacrifices

might solve an array of large and complex problems, all at the same time. That's harder,

but it might be better. Adapting to the necessary discipline of medical school will, for

example, fatally interfere with the licentious lifestyle of a hardcore undergraduate party

animal. Giving that up is a sacrifice. But a physician can—to paraphrase George W.—

really put food on his family. That's a lot of trouble dispensed with, over a very long

period of time. So, sacrifices are necessary, to improve the future, and larger sacrifices can

be better.

Second question (set of related questions, really): We've already established the basic

principle— *sacrifice will improve the future*. But a principle, once established, has to be

fleshed out. Its full extension or significance has to be understood. What is implied by the

idea that sacrifice will improve the future, in the most extreme and final of cases? Where

does that basic principle find its limits? We must ask, to begin, "What would be the

largest, most effective—most pleasing—of all possible sacrifices?" and then "How good

might the best possible future be, if the most effective sacrifice could be made?"

The biblical story of Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve's sons, immediately follows the

story of the expulsion from Paradise, as mentioned previously. Cain and Abel are really

the first humans, since their parents were made directly by God, and not born in the

standard manner. Cain and Abel live *in history*, not in Eden. They must work. They must

make sacrifices, to please God, and they do so, with altar and proper ritual. But things get

complicated. Abel's offerings please God, but Cain's do not. Abel is rewarded, many times

over, but Cain is not. It's not precisely clear why (although the text strongly hints that

Cain's heart is just not in it). Maybe the quality of what Cain put forward was low. Maybe

his spirit was begrudging. Or maybe God was vexed, for some secret reasons of His own.

And all of this is realistic, including the text's vagueness of explanation. Not all sacrifices

are of equal quality. Furthermore, it often appears that sacrifices of apparently high

quality are not rewarded with a better future—and it's not clear why. Why isn't God

happy? What would have to change to make Him so? Those are difficult questions—and

everyone asks them, all the time, even if they don't notice.

Asking such questions is indistinguishable from thinking.

The realization that pleasure could be usefully forestalled dawned on us with great

difficulty. It runs absolutely contrary to our ancient, fundamental animal instincts, which

demand immediate satisfaction (particularly under conditions of deprivation, which are

both inevitable and commonplace). And, to complicate the matter, such delay only

becomes useful when civilization has stabilized itself enough to guarantee the existence

of the delayed reward, in the future. If everything you save will be destroyed or, worse,

stolen, there is no point in saving. It is for this reason that a wolf will down twenty

pounds of raw meat in a single meal. He isn't thinking, "Man, I hate it when I binge. I

should save some of this for next week." So how was it that those two impossible and

necessarily simultaneous accomplishments (delay and the stabilization of society into the

future) could possibly have manifested themselves?

Here is a developmental progression, from animal to human. It's wrong, no doubt, in

the details. But it's sufficiently correct, for our purposes, in theme: First, there is excess

food. Large carcasses, mammoths or other massive herbivores, might provide that. (We

ate a lot of mammoths. Maybe all of them.) After a kill, with a large animal, there is some

left for later. That's accidental, at first—but, eventually, the utility of "for later" starts to

be appreciated. Some provisional notion of sacrifice develops at the same time: "If I leave

some, even if I want it now, I won't have to be hungry later." That provisional notion

develops, to the next level ("If I leave some for later, I won't have to go hungry, and

neither will those I care for") and then to the next ("I can't possibly eat all of this

mammoth, but I can't store the rest for too long, either. Maybe I should feed some to

other people. Maybe they'll remember, and feed me some of their mammoth, when they

have some and I have none. Then I'll get some mammoth now, *and* some mammoth later.

That's a good deal. And maybe those I'm sharing with will come to trust me, more

generally. Maybe then we could trade forever"). In such a manner, "mammoth" becomes

"future mammoth," and "future mammoth" becomes "personal reputation." That's the

emergence of the social contract.

To share does not mean to give away something you value, and get nothing back. That

is instead only what every child who refuses to share fears it means. To share means,

properly, to initiate the process of trade. A child who can't share—who can't trade—can't

have any friends, because having friends is a form of trade. Benjamin Franklin once

suggested that a newcomer to a neighbourhood ask a new neighbour to do him or her a

favour, citing an old maxim: *He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you*

another than he whom you yourself have obliged.117 In Franklin's opinion, asking someone for

something (not too extreme, obviously) was the most useful and immediate invitation to

social interaction. Such asking on the part of the newcomer provided the neighbour with

an opportunity to show him- or herself as a good person, at first encounter. It also meant

that the latter could now ask the former for a favour, in return, because of the debt

incurred, increasingly their mutual familiarity and trust. In that manner both parties

could overcome their natural hesitancy and mutual fear of the stranger.

It is better to have something than nothing. It's better yet to share generously the

something you have. It's even better than that, however, to become widely known for

generous sharing. That's something that lasts. That's something that's reliable. And, at

this point of abstraction, we can observe how the groundwork for the conceptions *reliable*,

honest and *generous* has been laid. The basis for an articulated morality has been put in

place. The productive, truthful sharer is the prototype for the good citizen, and the good

man. We can see in this manner how from the simple notion that "leftovers are a good

idea" the highest moral principles might emerge.

It's as if something like the following happened as humanity developed. First were the

endless tens or hundreds of thousands of years prior to the emergence of written history

and drama. During this time, the twin practices of delay and exchange begin to emerge,

slowly and painfully. Then they become represented, in metaphorical abstraction, as

rituals and tales of sacrifice, told in a manner such as this: "It's *as if* there is a powerful

Figure in the Sky, who sees all, and is judging you. Giving up something you value seems

to make Him happy—and you want to make Him happy, because all Hell breaks loose if

you don't. So, practise sacrificing, and sharing, until you become expert at it, and things

will go well for you." **fn1** No one said any of this, at least not so plainly and directly. But it

was implicit in the practice and then in the stories.

Action came first (as it had to, as the animals we once were could act but could not

think). *Implicit, unrecognized value came first* (as the actions that preceded thought embodied

value, but did not make that value explicit). People watched the successful succeed and

the unsuccessful fail for thousands and thousands of years. We thought it over, and drew

a conclusion: *The successful among us delay gratification*. *The successful among us bargain with the*

future. A great idea begins to emerge, taking ever-more-clearly-articulated form, in ever

more-clearly-articulated stories: What's the difference between the successful and the

unsuccessful? *The successful sacrifice*. Things get better, as the successful practise their

sacrifices. The questions become increasingly precise and, simultaneously, broader: What

is the greatest possible sacrifice? For the greatest possible good? And the answers become

increasingly deeper and profound.

The God of Western tradition, like so many gods, requires sacrifice. We have already

examined why. But sometimes He goes even further. He demands not only sacrifice, but

the sacrifice of precisely what is loved best. This is most starkly portrayed (and most

confusingly evident) in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, beloved of God, long

wanted a son—and God promised him exactly that, after many delays, and under the

apparently impossible conditions of old age and a long-barren wife. But not so long

afterward, when the miraculously-borne Isaac is still a child, God turns around and in

unreasonable and apparently barbaric fashion demands that His faithful servant offer his

son as a sacrifice. The story ends happily: God sends an angel to stay Abraham's obedient

hand and accepts a ram in Isaac's stead. That's a good thing, but it doesn't really address

the issue at hand: Why is God's going further necessary? Why does He—why does life—

impose such demands?

We'll start our analysis with a truism, stark, self-evident and understated: *Sometimes*

things do not go well. That seems to have much to do with the terrible nature of the world,

with its plagues and famines and tyrannies and betrayals. But here's the rub: *sometimes,*

when things are not going well, it's not the world that's the cause. The cause is instead that which is

currently most valued, subjectively and personally. Why? Because the world is revealed, to an

indeterminate degree, through the template of your values (much more on this in Rule

10). If the world you are seeing is not the world you want, therefore, it's time to examine

your values. It's time to rid yourself of your current presuppositions. It's time to let go. It

might even be time to sacrifice what you love best, so that you can become who you

might become, instead of staying who you are.

There's an old and possibly apocryphal story about how to catch a monkey that

illustrates this set of ideas very well. First, you must find a large, narrow-necked jar, just

barely wide enough in diameter at the top for a monkey to put its hand inside. Then you

must fill the jar part way with rocks, so it is too heavy for a monkey to carry. Then you

must to scatter some treats, attractive to monkeys, near the jar, to attract one, and put

some more inside the jar. A monkey will come along, reach into the narrow opening, and

grab while the grabbing's good. But now he won't be able to extract his fist, now full of

treats, from the too-narrow opening of the jar. Not without unclenching his hand. Not

without relinquishing what he already has. And that's just what he won't do. The

monkey-catcher can just walk over to the jar and pick up the monkey. The animal will not

sacrifice the part to preserve the whole.

Something valuable, given up, ensures future prosperity. Something valuable,

sacrificed, pleases the Lord. What is most valuable, and best sacrificed?—or, what is at

least *emblematic of that*? A choice cut of meat. The best animal in a flock. A most valued

possession. What's above even that? Something intensely personal and painful to give up.

That's symbolized, perhaps, in God's insistence on circumcision as part of Abraham's

sacrificial routine, where the part is offered, symbolically, to redeem the whole. What's

beyond that? What pertains more closely to the whole person, rather than the part? What

constitutes the ultimate sacrifice—for the gain of the ultimate prize?

It's a close race between child and self. The sacrifice of the mother, offering her child to

the world, is exemplified profoundly by Michelangelo's great sculpture, the *Pietà*,

illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. Michelangelo crafted Mary contemplating her

Son, crucified and ruined. It's *her fault*. It was through her that He entered the world and

its great drama of Being. *Is it right to bring a baby into this terrible world?* Every woman asks

herself that question. Some say no, and they have their reasons. Mary answers yes,

voluntarily, knowing full well what's to come—as do all mothers, if they allow themselves

to see. It's an act of supreme courage, when undertaken voluntarily.

In turn, Mary's son, Christ, offers Himself to God and the world, to betrayal, torture

and death—to the very point of despair on the cross, where he cries out those terrible

words: *my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* (Matthew 27:46). That is the archetypal

story of the man who gives his all for the sake of the better—who offers up his life for the

advancement of Being—who allows God's will to become manifest fully within the

confines of a single, mortal life. That is the model for the honourable man. In Christ's

case, however—as He sacrifices Himself—God, His Father, is simultaneously sacrificing

His son. It is for this reason that the Christian sacrificial drama of Son and Self is

archetypal. It's a story at the limit, where nothing more extreme—nothing greater—can

be imagined. That's the very definition of "archetypal." That's the core of what

constitutes "religious."

Pain and suffering define the world. Of that, there can be no doubt. Sacrifice can hold

pain and suffering in abeyance, to a greater or lesser degree—and greater sacrifices can do

that more effectively than lesser. Of that, there can be no doubt. Everyone holds this

knowledge in their soul. Thus, the person who wishes to alleviate suffering—who wishes

to rectify the flaws in Being; who wants to bring about the best of all possible futures;

who wants to create Heaven on Earth—will make the greatest of sacrifices, of self and

child, of everything that is loved, to live a life aimed at the Good. He will forego

expediency. He will pursue the path of ultimate meaning. And he will in that manner

bring salvation to the ever-desperate world.

But is such a thing even possible? Is this simply not asking too much of the individual?

It's all well and good for Christ, it might be objected—but He was the veritable Son of

God. But we do have other examples, some much less mythologized and archetypal.

Consider, for example, the case of Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher. After a

lifetime of seeking the truth and educating his countrymen, Socrates faced a trial for

crimes against the city-state of Athens, his hometown. His accusers provided him with

plenty of opportunity to simply leave, and avoid the trouble.[118] But the great sage had

already considered and rejected this course of action. His companion Hermogenes

observed him at this time discussing "any and every subject" [119] other than his trial, and

asked him why he appeared so unconcerned. Socrates first answered that he had been

126

preparing his whole life to defend himself,[120] but then said something more mysterious

and significant: When he attempted specifically to consider strategies that would produce

acquittal "by fair means or foul"[121]—or even when merely considering his potential

actions at the trial[122]—he found himself interrupted by his divine sign: his internal spirit,

voice or *daemon*. Socrates discussed this voice at the trial itself.[123] He said that one of the

factors distinguishing him from other men[124] was his absolute willingness to listen to its

warnings—to *stop speaking* and *cease acting* when it objected. The Gods themselves had

deemed him wise above other men, not least for this reason, according to the Delphic

Oracle herself, held to be a reliable judge of such things." [125]

Because his ever-reliable internal voice objected to fleeing (or even to defending

himself) Socrates radically altered his view of the significance of his trial. He began to

consider that it might be a blessing, rather than a curse. He told Hermogenes of his

realization that the spirit to whom he had always listened might be offering him a way

out of life, in a manner "easiest but also the least irksome to one's friends," 126 with

"sound body and a spirit capable of showing kindliness"127 and absent the "throes of

illness" and vexations of extreme old age.128 Socrates' decision to accept his fate allowed

him to put away mortal terror in the face of death itself, prior to and during the trial, after

the sentence was handed down, 129 and even later, during his execution. 130 He saw that his life had been so rich and full that he could let it go, gracefully. He was given the

opportunity to put his affairs in order. He saw that he could escape the terrible slow

degeneration of the advancing years. He came to understand all that was happening to

him as a gift from the gods. He was not therefore required to defend himself against his

accusers—at least not with the aim of pronouncing his innocence, and escaping his fate.

Instead, he turned the tables, addressing his judges in a manner that makes the reader

understand precisely why the town council wanted this man dead. Then he took his

poison, like a man.

Socrates rejected expediency, and the necessity for manipulation that accompanied it.

He chose instead, under the direst of conditions, to maintain his pursuit of the

meaningful and the true. Twenty-five hundred years later, we remember his decision and

take comfort from it. What can we learn from this? If you cease to utter falsehoods and

live according to the dictates of your conscience, you can maintain your nobility, even

when facing the ultimate threat; if you abide, truthfully and courageously, by the highest

of ideals, you will be provided with more security and strength than will be offered by any

short-sighted concentration on your own safety; if you live properly, fully, you can

discover meaning so profound that it protects you even from the fear of death.

Could all that possibly be true?

Death, Toil and Evil

The tragedy of self-conscious Being produces suffering, inevitable suffering. That

suffering in turn motivates the desire for selfish, immediate gratification—for expediency.

But sacrifice—and work—serves far more effectively than short-term impulsive pleasure

at keeping suffering at bay. However, tragedy itself (conceived of as the arbitrary

harshness of society and nature, set against the vulnerability of the individual) is not the

only—and perhaps not even the primary—source of suffering. There is also the problem

of evil to consider. The world is set hard against us, of a certainty, but man's inhumanity

to man is something even worse. Thus, the problem of sacrifice is compounded in its

complexity: it is not only privation and mortal limitation that must be addressed by work

—by the willingness to offer, and to give up. It is the problem of evil as well.

Consider, once again, the story of Adam and Eve. Life becomes very hard for their

Consider, once again, the story of Adam and Eve. Life becomes very hard for their

children (that's us) after the fall and awakening of our archetypal parents. First is the

terrible fate awaiting us in the post-Paradisal world—in the world of history. Not the least

of this is what Goethe called "our creative, endless toil. "131 Humans work, as we have

seen. We work because we have awakened to the truth of our own vulnerability, our

subjugation to disease and death, and wish to protect ourselves for as long as possible.

Once we can see the future, we must prepare for it, or live in denial and terror. We

therefore sacrifice the pleasures of today for the sake of a better tomorrow. But the

realization of mortality and the necessity of work is not the only revelation to Adam and

Eve when they eat the forbidden Fruit, wake up, and open their eyes. They were also

granted (or cursed by) the knowledge of Good and Evil.

It took me decades to understand what that means (to understand even part of what

that means). It's this: once you become consciously aware that you, yourself, are

vulnerable, you understand the nature of human vulnerability, in general. You understand

what it's like to be fearful, and angry, and resentful, and bitter. You understand what pain

means. And once you truly understand such feelings in yourself, and how they're

produced, *you understand how to produce them in others*. It is in this manner that the self-

conscious beings that we are become voluntarily and exquisitely capable of tormenting

others (and ourselves, of course—but it's the others we are concerned about right now).

We see the consequences of this new knowledge manifest themselves when we meet Cain

and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve.

By the time of their appearance, mankind has learned to make sacrifices to God. On

altars of stone, designed for that purpose, a communal ritual is performed: the

immolation of something valuable, a choice animal or portion thereof, and its

transformation through fire to the smoke (to the spirit) that rises to Heaven above. In

this manner, the idea of delay is dramatized, so that the future might improve. Abel's

sacrifices are accepted by God, and he flourishes. Cain's, however, are rejected. He

becomes jealous and bitter—and it's no wonder. If someone fails and is rejected because

he refused to make any sacrifices at all—well, that's at least understandable. He may still

feel resentful and vengeful, but knows in his heart that he is personally to blame. That

knowledge generally places a limit on his outrage. It's much worse, however, if he had

actually foregone the pleasures of the moment—if he had strived and toiled and things

still didn't work out—if he was rejected, despite his efforts. Then he's lost the present *and*

the future. Then his work—his sacrifice—has been pointless. Under such conditions, the

world darkens, and the soul rebels.

Cain is outraged by his rejection. He confronts God, accuses Him, and curses His

creation. That proves to be a very poor decision. God responds, in no uncertain terms,

that the fault is all with Cain—and worse: that Cain has knowingly and creatively dallied

with sin, 132 and reaped the consequences. This is not at all what Cain wanted to hear. It's

by no means an apology on God's part. Instead, it's insult, added to injury. Cain,

embittered to the core by God's response, plots revenge. He defies the creator,

audaciously. It's daring. Cain knows how to hurt. He's self-conscious, after all—and has

become even more so, in his suffering and shame. So, he murders Abel in cold blood. He

kills his brother, his own ideal (as Abel is everything Cain wishes to be). He commits this

most terrible of crimes to spite himself, all of mankind, and God Himself, all at once. He

does it to wreak havoc and gain his vengeance. He does it to register his fundamental

opposition to existence—to protest the intolerable vagaries of Being itself. And Cain's

children—the offspring, as it were of both his body and his decision—are worse. In his

existential fury, Cain kills once. Lamech, his descendant, goes much further. "I have slain

a man to my wounding," says Lamech," and a young man to my hurt. If Cain shall be

avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold" (Genesis 4:23-24). Tubulcain, an

instructor of "every artificer in brass and iron" (Genesis 4:22), is by tradition seven

generations from Cain—and the first creator of weapons of war. And next, in the Genesis

stories, comes the flood. The juxtaposition is by no means accidental.

Evil enters the world with self-consciousness. The toil with which God curses Adam—that's

bad enough. The trouble in childbirth with which Eve is burdened and her consequent

dependence on her husband are no trivial matters, either. They are indicative of the

implicit and oft-agonizing tragedies of insufficiency, privation, brute necessity and

subjugation to illness and death that simultaneously define and plague existence. Their

mere factual reality is sometimes sufficient to turn even a courageous person against life.

It has been my experience, however, that human beings are strong enough to tolerate the

implicit tragedies of Being without faltering—without breaking or, worse, breaking bad. I

have seen evidence of this repeatedly in my private life, in my work as a professor, and in

my role as a clinical practitioner. Earthquakes, floods, poverty, cancer—we're tough

enough to take on all of that. But human evil adds a whole new dimension of misery to

the world. It is for this reason that the rise of self-consciousness and its attendant

realization of mortality and knowledge of Good and Evil is presented in the early chapters

of Genesis (and in the vast tradition that surrounds them) as a cataclysm of cosmic

magnitude.

Conscious human malevolence can break the spirit even tragedy could not shake. I

remember discovering (with her) that one of my clients had been shocked into years of

serious post-traumatic stress disorder—daily physical shaking and terror, and chronic

nightly insomnia—by the mere expression on her enraged, drunken boyfriend's face. His

"fallen countenance" (Genesis 4:5) indicated his clear and conscious desire to do her

harm. She was more naïve than she should have been, and that predisposed her to the

trauma, but that's not the point: the voluntary evil we do one another can be profoundly

and permanently damaging, even to the strong. And what is it, precisely, that motivates

such evil?

It doesn't make itself manifest merely in consequence of the hard lot of life. It doesn't

even emerge, simply, because of failure itself, or because of the disappointment and

bitterness that failure often and understandably engenders. But the hard lot of life,

magnified by the consequence of continually rejected sacrifices (however poorly

conceptualized; however half-heartedly executed)? That will bend and twist people into

the truly monstrous forms who then begin, consciously, to work evil; who then begin to

generate for themselves and others little besides pain and suffering (and who do it for the

sake of that pain and suffering). In that manner, a truly vicious circle takes hold:

begrudging sacrifice, half-heartedly undertaken; rejection of that sacrifice by God or by

reality (take your pick); angry resentment, generated by that rejection; descent into

bitterness and the desire for revenge; sacrifice undertaken even more begrudgingly, or

refused altogether. And it's Hell itself that serves as the destination place of that

downward spiral.

Life is indeed "nasty, brutish and short," as the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes so

memorably remarked. But man's capacity for evil makes it worse. This means that the

central problem of life—the dealing with its brute facts—is not merely what and how to

sacrifice to diminish suffering, but what and how to sacrifice to diminish suffering *and evil*

— the conscious and voluntary and vengeful source of the worst suffering. The story of Cain and

Abel is one manifestation of the archetypal tale of the hostile brothers, hero and

adversary: the two elements of the individual human psyche, one aimed up, at the Good,

and the other, down, at Hell itself. Abel is a hero, true: but a hero who is ultimately

defeated by Cain. Abel could please God—a non-trivial and unlikely accomplishment—but

he could not overcome human evil. For this reason, Abel is archetypally incomplete.

Perhaps he was naive, although a vengeful brother can be inconceivably treacherous and

subtil, like the snake in Genesis 3:1. But excuses—even reasons—even understandable

reasons—don't matter; not in the final analysis. The problem of evil remained unsolved

even by the divinely acceptable sacrifices of Abel. It took thousands of additional years for

humanity to come up with anything else resembling a solution. The same issue emerges

again, in its culminating form, the story of Christ and his temptation by Satan. But this

time it's expressed more comprehensively—and the hero wins.

Evil, Confronted

Jesus was led into the wilderness, according to the story, “to be tempted by the Devil”

(Matthew 4:1), prior to his crucifixion. This is the story of Cain, restated abstractly. Cain

is neither content nor happy, as we have seen. He’s working hard, or so he thinks, but

God is not pleased. Meanwhile, Abel is, by all appearances, dancing his way through life.

His crops flourish. Women love him. Worst of all, he’s a genuinely good man. Everyone

knows it. He deserves his good fortune. All the more reason to envy and hate him . Things

do not progress well for Cain, by contrast, and he broods on his misfortune, like a vulture

on an egg. He strives, in his misery, to give birth to something hellish and, in doing so,

enters the desert wilderness of his own mind. He obsesses over his ill fortune; his

betrayal by God. He nourishes his resentment. He indulges in ever more elaborate

fantasies of revenge. And as he does so, his arrogance grows to Luciferian proportions.

“I’m ill-used and oppressed,” he thinks. “This is a stupid bloody planet. As far as I’m

concerned, it can go to Hell.” And with that, Cain encounters Satan in the wilderness, for

all intents and purposes, and falls prey to his temptations. And he does what he can to

make things as bad as possible, motivated by (in John Milton's imperishable words):

So deep a malice, to confound the Race

Of Mankind in one Root, and Earth with Hell

to mingle and involve—done all to spite

the Great Creator ... 133

Cain turns to Evil to obtain what Good denied him, and he does it voluntarily, self-

consciously and with malice aforethought.

Christ takes a different path. His sojourn in the desert is the dark night of the soul—a

deeply human and universal human experience. It's the journey to that place each of us

goes when things fall apart, friends and family are distant, hopelessness and despair reign,

and black nihilism beckons. And, let us suggest, in testament to the exactitude of the

story: forty days and nights starving alone in the wilderness might take you exactly to that

place. It is in such a manner that the objective and subjective worlds come crashing,

synchronistically, together. Forty days is a deeply symbolic period of time, echoing the

forty years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert after escaping the tyranny of

Pharaoh and Egypt. Forty days is a long time in the underworld of dark assumptions,

confusion and fear—long enough to journey to the very center, which is Hell itself. A

journey there to see the sights can be undertaken by anyone—anyone, that is, who is

willing to take the evil of self and Man with sufficient seriousness. A bit of familiarity

with history can help. A sojourn through the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century,

with its concentration camps, forced labor and murderous ideological pathologies is as

good a place as any to start—that, and some consideration of the fact that worst of the

concentration camp guards were human, all-too-human, too. That's all part of making the

desert story real again; part of updating it, for the modern mind.

"After Auschwitz," said Theodor Adorno, student of authoritarianism, "there should be

no poetry." He was wrong. But the poetry should be about Auschwitz. In the grim wake

of the last ten decades of the previous millennium, the terrible destructiveness of man has

become a problem whose seriousness self-evidently dwarfs even the problem of

unredeemed suffering. And neither one of those problems is going to be solved in the

absence of a solution to the other. This is where the idea of Christ's taking on the sins of

mankind as if they were His own becomes key, opening the door to deep understanding of

the desert encounter with the devil himself. "*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*,"

said the Roman playwright Terence: nothing human is alien to me.

"No tree can grow to Heaven," adds the ever-terrifying Carl Gustav Jung, psychoanalyst

extraordinaire, "unless its roots reach down to Hell." 134 Such a statement should give

everyone who encounters it pause. There was no possibility for movement upward, in

that great psychiatrist's deeply considered opinion, without a corresponding move down.

It is for this reason that enlightenment is so rare. Who is willing to do that? Do you really

want to meet who's in charge, at the very bottom of the most wicked thoughts? What did

Eric Harris, mass murderer of the Columbine high school, write so incomprehensibly the

very day prior to massacring his classmates? *It's interesting, when I'm in my human form,*

knowing I'm going to die. Everything has a touch of triviality to it. 135 Who would dare explain

such a missive?—or, worse, explain it away?

In the desert, Christ encounters Satan (see Luke 4:1–13 and Matthew 4:1–11). This

story has a clear psychological meaning—a metaphorical meaning—in addition to

whatever else material and metaphysical alike it might signify. It means that Christ *is*

forever He who determines to take personal responsibility for the full depth of human depravity. It

means that Christ is eternally He who is willing to confront and deeply consider and risk

the temptations posed by the most malevolent elements of human nature. It means that

Christ is always he who is willing to confront evil—consciously, fully and voluntarily—in

the form that dwelt simultaneously within Him and in the world. This is nothing merely

abstract (although it is abstract); nothing to be brushed over. It's no merely intellectual

matter.

Soldiers who develop post-traumatic stress disorder frequently develop it not because

of something they saw, but because of something they did. 136 There are many demons, so

to speak, on the battlefield. Involvement in warfare is something that can open a gateway

to Hell. Now and then something climbs through and possesses some naive farm-boy

from Iowa, and he turns monstrous. He does something terrible. He rapes and kills the

women and massacres the infants of My Lai. And he watches himself do it. And some

dark part of him enjoys it—and that is the part that is most unforgettable. And, later, he

will not know how to reconcile himself with the reality about himself and the world that

was then revealed. And no wonder.

In the great and fundamental myths of ancient Egypt, the god Horus—often regarded as

a precursor to Christ, historically and conceptually speaking137—experienced the same

thing, when he confronted his evil uncle Set, **fn2** usurper of the throne of Osiris, Horus's

father. Horus, the all-seeing Egyptian falcon god, the Egyptian eye of supreme, eternal

attention itself, has the courage to contend with Set's true nature, meeting him in direct

combat. In the struggle with his dread uncle, however, his consciousness is damaged. He

loses an eye. This is despite his godly stature and his unparalleled capacity for vision.

What would a mere man lose, who attempted the same thing? But perhaps he might gain

in internal vision and understanding something proportional to what he loses in

perception of the outside world.

Satan embodies the refusal of sacrifice; he is arrogance, incarnate; spite, deceit, and

cruel, conscious malevolence. He is pure hatred of Man, God and Being. He will not

humble himself, even when he knows full well that he should. Furthermore, he knows

exactly what he is doing, obsessed with the desire for destruction, and does it

deliberately, thoughtfully and completely. It has to be him, therefore—the very archetype

of Evil—who confronts and tempts Christ, the archetype of Good. It must be him who

offers to the Savior of Mankind, under the most trying of conditions, what all men most

ardently desire.

Satan first tempts the starving Christ to quell His hunger by transforming the desert

rocks into bread. Then he suggests that He throw Himself off a cliff, calling on God and

the angels to break His fall. Christ responds to the first temptation by saying, “One does

not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” What

does this answer mean? It means that even under conditions of extreme privation, there

are more important things than food. To put it another way: Bread is of little use to the

man who has betrayed his soul, even if he is currently starving. **fn3** Christ could clearly use his near-infinite power, as Satan indicates, to gain bread, now—to break his fast—

even, in the broader sense, to gain wealth, in the world (which would theoretically solve

the problem of bread, more permanently). But at what cost? And to what gain? Gluttony,

in the midst of moral desolation? That’s the poorest and most miserable of feasts. Christ

aims, therefore, at something higher: at the description of a mode of Being that would

finally and forever solve the problem of hunger. If we all chose instead of expedience to

dine on the Word of God? That would require each and every person to live, and produce,

and sacrifice, and speak, and share in a manner that would permanently render the

privation of hunger a thing of the past. And that's how the problem of hunger in the

privations of the desert is most truly and finally addressed.

There are other indications of this in the gospels, in dramatic, enacted form. Christ is

continually portrayed as the purveyor of endless sustenance. He miraculously multiplies

bread and fish. He turns water into wine. What does this mean? It's a call to the pursuit

of higher meaning as the mode of living that is simultaneously most practical and of

highest quality. It's a call portrayed in dramatic/literary form: live as the archetypal

Saviour lives, and you and those around you will hunger no more. The beneficence of the

world manifests itself to those who live properly. That's better than bread. That's better

than the money that will buy bread. Thus Christ, the symbolically perfect individual,

overcomes the first temptation. Two more follow.

"Throw yourself off that cliff," Satan says, offering the next temptation. "If God exists,

He will surely save you. If you are in fact his Son, God will surely save you." Why would

God not make Himself manifest, to rescue His only begotten Child from hunger and

isolation and the presence of great evil? But that establishes no pattern for life. It doesn't

even work as literature. The *deus ex machina*—the emergence of a divine force that

magically rescues the hero from his predicament—is the cheapest trick in the hack

writer's playbook. It makes a mockery of independence, and courage, and destiny, and

free will, and responsibility. Furthermore, God is in no wise a safety net for the blind.

He's not someone to be commanded to perform magic tricks, or forced into Self-

revelation—not even by His own Son.

"Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:7)—this answer, though rather

brief, dispenses with the second temptation. Christ does not casually order or even dare

ask God to intervene on his behalf. He refuses to dispense with His responsibility for the

events of His own life. He refuses to demand that God prove His presence. He refuses, as

well, to solve the problems of mortal vulnerability in a merely personal manner)—by

compelling God to save Him—because that would not solve the problem for everyone else

and for all time. There is also the echo of the rejection of the comforts of insanity in this

forgone temptation. Easy but psychotic self-identification as the merely magical Messiah

might well have been a genuine temptation under the harsh conditions of Christ's sojourn

in the desert. Instead He rejects the idea that salvation—or even survival, in the shorter

term—depends on narcissistic displays of superiority and the commanding of God, even

by His Son.

Finally comes the third temptation, the most compelling of all. Christ sees the

kingdoms of the world laid before Him for the taking. That's the siren call of earthly

power: the opportunity to control and order everyone and everything. Christ is offered the

pinnacle of the dominance hierarchy, the animalistic desire of every naked ape: the

obedience of all, the most wondrous of estates, the power to build and to increase, the

possibility of unlimited sensual gratification. That's expedience, writ large. But that's not

all. Such expansion of status also provides unlimited opportunity for the inner darkness

to reveal itself. The lust for blood, rape and destruction is very much part of power's

attraction. It is not only that men desire power so that they will no longer suffer. It is not

only that they desire power so that they can overcome subjugation to want, disease and

death. Power also means the capacity to take vengeance, ensure submission, and crush

enemies. Grant Cain enough power and he will not only kill Abel. He will torture him,

first, imaginatively and endlessly. Then and only then will he kill him. Then he will come

after everyone else.

There's something above even the pinnacle of the highest of dominance hierarchies,

access to which should not be sacrificed for mere proximal success. It's a real place, too,

although not to be conceptualized in the standard geographical sense of place we typically

use to orient ourselves. I had a vision, once, of an immense landscape, spread for miles

out to the horizon before me. I was high in the air, granted a bird's-eye view. Everywhere

I could see great stratified multi-storied pyramids of glass, some small, some large, some

overlapping, some separate—all akin to modern skyscrapers; all full of people striving to

reach each pyramid's very pinnacle. But there was something above that pinnacle, a

domain outside each pyramid, in which all were nested. That was the privileged position

of the eye that could or perhaps chose to soar freely above the fray; that chose not to

dominate any specific group or cause but instead to somehow simultaneously transcend

all. That was attention, itself, pure and untrammeled: detached, alert, watchful attention,

waiting to act when the time was right and the place had been established. As the Tao te

Ching has it:

He who contrives, defeats his purpose;

and he who is grasping, loses.

The sage does not contrive to win,

and therefore is not defeated;

he is not grasping, so does not lose. 138

There is a powerful call to proper Being in the story of the third temptation. To obtain the

greatest possible prize—the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth, the

resurrection of Paradise—the individual must conduct his or her life in a manner that

requires the rejection of immediate gratification, of natural and perverse desires alike, no

matter how powerfully and convincingly and realistically those are offered, and dispense,

as well with the temptations of evil. Evil amplifies the catastrophe of life, increasing

dramatically the motivation for expediency already there because of the essential tragedy

of Being. Sacrifice of the more prosaic sort can keep that tragedy at bay, more or less

successfully, but it takes a special kind of sacrifice to defeat evil. It is the description of

that special sacrifice that has preoccupied the Christian (and more than Christian)

imagination for centuries. Why has it not had the desired effect? Why do we remain

unconvinced that there is no better plan than lifting our heads skyward, aiming at the

Good, and sacrificing everything to that ambition? Have we merely failed to understand,

or have we fallen, wilfully or otherwise, off the path?

Christianity and its Problems

Carl Jung hypothesized that the European mind found itself motivated to develop the

cognitive technologies of science—to investigate the material world—after implicitly

concluding that Christianity, with its laser-like emphasis on spiritual salvation, had failed

to sufficiently address the problem of suffering in the here-and-now. This realization

became unbearably acute in the three or four centuries before the Renaissance. In

133

consequence, a strange, profound, compensatory fantasy began to emerge, deep in the

collective Western psyche, manifesting itself first in the strange musings of alchemy, and

developing only after many centuries into the fully articulated form of science. 139 It was

the alchemists who first seriously began to examine the transformations of matter,

hoping to discover the secrets of health, wealth and longevity. These great dreamers

(Newton foremost among them140) intuited and then imagined that the material world,

damned by the Church, held secrets the revelation of which could free humanity from its

earthly pain and limitations. It was that vision, driven by doubt, that provided the

tremendous collective and individual motivational power necessary for the development

of science, with its extreme demands on individual thinkers for concentration and delay of

gratification.

This is not to say that Christianity, even in its incompletely realized form, was a failure.

Quite the contrary: Christianity achieved the well-nigh impossible. The Christian doctrine

elevated the individual soul, placing slave and master and commoner and nobleman alike

on the same metaphysical footing, rendering them equal before God and the law.

Christianity insisted that even the king was only one among many. For something so

contrary to all apparent evidence to find its footing, the idea that that worldly power and

prominence were indicators of God's particular favor had to be radically de-emphasized.

This was partly accomplished through the strange Christian insistence that salvation

could not be obtained through effort or worth—through "works. "[141] Whatever its

limitations, the development of such doctrine prevented king, aristocrat and wealthy

merchant alike from lording it morally over the commoner. In consequence, the

metaphysical conception of the implicit transcendent worth of each and every soul

established itself against impossible odds as the fundamental presupposition of Western

law and society. That was not the case in the world of the past, and is not the case yet in

most places in the world of the present. It is in fact nothing short of a miracle (and we

should keep this fact firmly before our eyes) that the hierarchical slave-based societies of

our ancestors reorganized themselves, under the sway of an ethical/religious revelation,

such that the ownership and absolute domination of another person came to be viewed as

wrong.

It would do us well to remember, as well, that the immediate utility of slavery is

obvious, and that the argument that the strong should dominate the weak is compelling,

convenient and eminently practical (at least for the strong). This means that a

revolutionary critique of everything slave-owning societies valued was necessary before

the practice could be even questioned, let alone halted (including the idea that wielding

power and authority made the slave-owner noble; including the even more fundamental

idea that the power wielded by the slave-owner was valid and even virtuous). Christianity

made explicit the surprising claim that even the lowliest person had rights, genuine rights

—and that sovereign and state were morally charged, at a fundamental level, to recognize

those rights. Christianity put forward, explicitly, the even more incomprehensible idea

that the act of human ownership degraded the slaver (previously viewed as admiring

nobility) much or even more than the slave. We fail to understand how difficult such an

idea is to grasp. We forget that the opposite was self-evident throughout most of human

history. We think that it is the desire to enslave and dominate that requires explanation.

We have it backwards, yet again.

This is not to say that Christianity was without its problems. But it is more appropriate

to note that they were the sort of problems that emerge only after an entirely different set

of more serious problems has been solved. The society produced by Christianity was far

less barbaric than the pagan—even the Roman—ones it replaced. Christian society at least

recognized that feeding slaves to ravenous lions for the entertainment of the populace

was wrong, even if many barbaric practices still existed. It objected to infanticide, to

prostitution, and to the principle that might means right. It insisted that women were as

valuable as men (even though we are still working out how to manifest that insistence

politically). It demanded that even a society's enemies be regarded as human. Finally, it

separated church from state, so that all-too-human emperors could no longer claim the

veneration due to gods. All of this was asking the impossible: but it happened.

As the Christian revolution progressed, however, the impossible problems it had solved

disappeared from view. That's what happens to problems that are solved. And after the

solution was implemented, *even the fact that such problems had ever existed disappeared from*

view. Then and only then could the problems that remained, less amenable to quick

solution by Christian doctrine, come to occupy a central place in the consciousness of the

West—come to motivate, for example, the development of science, aimed at resolving the

corporeal, material suffering that was still all-too-painfully extant within successfully

Christianized societies. The fact that automobiles pollute only becomes a problem of

sufficient magnitude to attract public attention when the far worse problems that the

internal combustion engine solves has vanished from view. People stricken with poverty

don't care about carbon dioxide. It's not precisely that CO2 levels are irrelevant. It's that

they're irrelevant when you're working yourself to death, starving, scraping a bare living

from the stony, unyielding, thorn-and-thistle-infested ground. It's that they're irrelevant

until after the tractor is invented and hundreds of millions stop starving. In any case, by

the time Nietzsche entered the picture, in the late nineteenth century, the problems

Christianity had left unsolved had become paramount.

Nietzsche described himself, with no serious overstatement, as philosophizing with a

hammer.142 His devastating critique of Christianity—already weakened by its conflict

with the very science to which it had given rise—involved two main lines of attack.

Nietzsche claimed, first, that it was precisely the sense of truth developed in the highest

sense by Christianity itself that ultimately came to question and then to undermine the

fundamental presuppositions of the faith. That was partly because the difference between

moral or narrative truth and objective truth had not yet been fully comprehended (and so

an opposition was presumed where none necessarily exists)—but that does not bely the

point. Even when the modern atheists opposed to Christianity belittle fundamentalists for

insisting, for example, that the creation account in Genesis is objectively true, they are

using their sense of truth, highly developed over the centuries of Christian culture, to

engage in such argumentation. Carl Jung continued to develop Nietzsche's arguments

decades later, pointing out that Europe awoke, during the Enlightenment, as if from a

Christian dream, noticing that everything it had heretofore taken for granted could and

should be questioned. "God is dead," said Nietzsche. "God remains dead. And we have

killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was

the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under

our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? ”143

The central dogmas of the Western faith were no longer credible, according to

Nietzsche, given what the Western mind now considered truth. But it was his second

attack—on the removal of the true moral burden of Christianity during the development

of the Church—that was most devastating. The hammer-wielding philosopher mounted

an assault on an early-established and then highly influential line of Christian thinking:

that Christianity meant accepting the proposition that Christ's sacrifice, and only that sacrifice, had

redeemed humanity. This did not mean, absolutely, that a Christian who believed that

Christ died on the cross for the salvation of mankind was thereby freed from any and all

personal moral obligation. But it did strongly imply that the primary responsibility for

redemption had already been borne by the Saviour, and that nothing too important to do

remained for all-too-fallen human individuals.

Nietzsche believed that Paul, and later the Protestants following Luther, had removed

Nietzsche believed that Paul, and later the Protestants following Luther, had removed

moral responsibility from Christ's followers. They had watered down the idea of *the*

imitation of Christ. This imitation was the sacred duty of the believer not to adhere (or

merely to mouth) a set of statements about abstract belief but instead to actually manifest

the spirit of the Saviour in the particular, specific conditions of his or her life —to realize

or incarnate the archetype, as Jung had it; to clothe the eternal pattern in flesh. Nietzsche

writes, "The Christians have never practiced the actions Jesus prescribed them; and the

impudent garrulous talk about the 'justification by faith' and its supreme and sole

significance is only the consequence of the Church's lack of courage and will to profess

the works Jesus demanded." 144 Nietzsche was, indeed, a critic without parallel.

Dogmatic belief in the central axioms of Christianity (that Christ's crucifixion

redeemed the world; that salvation was reserved for the hereafter; that salvation could not

be achieved through works) had three mutually reinforcing consequences: First,

devaluation of the significance of earthly life, as only the hereafter mattered. This also meant that

it had become acceptable to overlook and shirk responsibility for the suffering that

existed in the here-and-now; Second, *passive acceptance of the status quo, because salvation*

could not be earned in any case through effort in this life (a consequence that Marx also derided,

with his proposition that religion was the opiate of the masses); and, finally, third, *the*

right of the believer to reject any real moral burden (outside of the stated belief in salvation

through Christ), *because the Son of God had already done all the important work*. It was for

such reasons that Dostoevsky, who was a great influence on Nietzsche, also criticized

institutional Christianity (although he arguably managed it in a more ambiguous but also

more sophisticated manner). In his masterwork , *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky has

his atheist superman, Ivan, tell a little story, "The Grand Inquisitor. "145 A brief review is

in order.

Ivan speaks to his brother Alyosha—whose pursuits as a monastic novitiate he holds in

contempt—of Christ returning to Earth at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. The

returning Savior makes quite a ruckus, as would be expected. He heals the sick. He raises

the dead. His antics soon attract attention from the Grand Inquisitor himself, who

promptly has Christ arrested and thrown into a prison cell. Later, the Inquisitor pays Him

a visit. He informs Christ that he is no longer needed. His return is simply too great a

threat to the Church. The Inquisitor tells Christ that the burden He laid on mankind—the

burden of existence in faith and truth—was simply too great for mere mortals to bear.

The Inquisitor claims that the Church, in its mercy, diluted that message, lifting the

demand for perfect Being from the shoulders of its followers, providing them instead with

the simple and merciful escapes of faith and the afterlife. That work took centuries, says

the Inquisitor, and the last thing the Church needs after all that effort is the return of the

Man who insisted that people bear all the weight in the first place. Christ listens in

silence. Then, as the Inquisitor turns to leave, Christ embraces him, and kisses him on

the lips. The Inquisitor turns white, in shock. Then he goes out, leaving the cell door

open.

The profundity of this story and the greatness of spirit necessary to produce it can

hardly be exaggerated. Dostoevsky, one of the great literary geniuses of all time,

confronted the most serious existential problems in all his great writings, and he did so

courageously, headlong, and heedless of the consequences. Clearly Christian, he

nonetheless adamantly refuses to make a straw man of his rationalist and atheistic

opponents. Quite the contrary: In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, Dostoevsky's

atheist, Ivan, argues against the presuppositions of Christianity with unsurpassable clarity

and passion. Alyosha, aligned with the Church by temperament and decision, cannot

undermine a single one of his brother's arguments (although his faith remains

unshakeable). Dostoevsky knew and admitted that Christianity had been defeated by the

rational faculty—by the intellect, even—but (and this is of primary importance) *he did not*

hide from that fact. He didn't attempt through denial or deceit or even satire to weaken the

position that opposed what he believed to be most true and valuable. He instead placed

action above words, and addressed the problem successfully. By the novel's end,

Dostoevsky has the great embodied moral goodness of Alyosha—the novitiate's

courageous imitation of Christ—attain victory over the spectacular but ultimately

nihilistic critical intelligence of Ivan.

The Christian church described by the Grand Inquisitor is the same church pilloried by

Nietzsche. Childish, sanctimonious, patriarchal, servant of the state, that church is

everything rotten still objected to by modern critics of Christianity. Nietzsche, for all his

brilliance, allows himself anger, but does not perhaps sufficiently temper it with

judgement. This is where Dostoevsky truly transcends Nietzsche, in my estimation—

where Dostoevsky's great literature transcends Nietzsche's mere philosophy. The Russian

writer's Inquisitor is the genuine article, in every sense. He is an opportunistic, cynical,

manipulative and cruel interrogator, willing to persecute heretics—even to torture and kill

them. He is the purveyor of a dogma he knows to be false. But Dostoevsky has Christ, the

archetypal perfect man, kiss him anyway. Equally importantly, in the aftermath of the

kiss, the Grand Inquisitor leaves the door ajar so Christ can escape his pending execution.

Dostoevsky saw that the great, corrupt edifice of Christianity still managed to make room

for the spirit of its Founder. That's the gratitude of a wise and profound soul for the

enduring wisdom of the West, despite its faults.

It's not as if Nietzsche was unwilling to give the faith—and, more particularly,

Catholicism—its due. Nietzsche believed that the long tradition of "unfreedom"

characterizing dogmatic Christianity—its insistence that everything be explained within

the confines of a single, coherent metaphysical theory—was a necessary precondition for

the emergence of the disciplined but free modern mind. As he stated in *Beyond Good and*

Evil:

The long bondage of the spirit … the persistent spiritual will to interpret everything that happened according to

a Christian scheme, and in every occurrence to rediscover and justify the Christian God in every accident:—all

this violence, arbitrariness, severity, dreadfulness, and unreasonableness, has proved itself the disciplinary

means whereby the European spirit has attained its strength, its remorseless curiosity and subtle mobility;

granted also that much irrecoverable strength and spirit had to be stifled, suffocated and spoiled in the

process. 146

For Nietzsche and Dostoevsky alike, freedom—even the ability to act—requires

constraint. For this reason, they both recognized the vital necessity of the dogma of the

Church. The individual must be constrained, moulded—even brought close to destruction

—by a restrictive, coherent disciplinary structure, before he or she can act freely and

competently. Dostoevsky, with his great generosity of spirit, granted to the church,

corrupt as it might be, a certain element of mercy, a certain pragmatism. He admitted that

the spirit of Christ, the world-engendering Logos, had historically and might still find its

resting place—even its sovereignty—within that dogmatic structure.

If a father disciplines his son properly, he obviously interferes with his freedom,

particularly in the here-and-now. He put limits on the voluntary expression of his son's

Being. forcing him to take his place as a socialized member of the world. Such a father

requires that all that childish potential be funneled down a singly pathway. In placing

such limitations on his son, he might be considered a destructive force, acting as he does

to replace the miraculous plurality of childhood with a single narrow actuality. But if the

father does not take such action, he merely lets his son remain Peter Pan, the eternal Boy,

King of the Lost Boys, Ruler of the non-existent Neverland. That is not a morally

acceptable alternative.

The dogma of the Church was undermined by the spirit of truth strongly developed by

the Church itself. That undermining culminated in the death of God. But the dogmatic

structure of the Church was a necessary disciplinary structure. A long period of

unfreedom—adherence to a singular interpretive structure—is necessary for the

development of a free mind. Christian dogma provided that unfreedom. But the dogma is

dead, at least to the modern Western mind. It perished along with God. What has

emerged from behind its corpse, however—and this is an issue of central importance—is

something even more dead; something that was never alive, even in the past: *nihilism, as*

well as an equally dangerous susceptibility to new, totalizing, utopian ideas. It was in the

aftermath of God's death that the great collective horrors of Communism and Fascism

sprang forth (as both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche predicted they would). Nietzsche, for his

part, posited that individual human beings would have to invent their own values in the

aftermath of God's death. But this is the element of his thinking that appears weakest,

psychologically: *we cannot invent our own values, because we cannot merely impose what we*

believe on our souls. This was Carl Jung's great discovery—made in no little part because of

his intense study of the problems posed by Nietzsche.

We rebel against our own totalitarianism, as much as that of others. I cannot merely

order myself to action, and neither can you. "I will stop procrastinating," I say, but I

don’t. “I will eat properly,” I say, but I don’t. “I will end my drunken misbehavior,” I say,

but I don’t. I cannot merely make myself over in the image constructed by my intellect

(particularly if that intellect is possessed by an ideology). I have a nature, and so do you,

and so do we all. We must discover that nature, and contend with it, before making peace

with ourselves. What is it, that we most truly are? What is it that we could most truly

become, knowing who we most truly are? We must get to the very bottom of things

before such questions can be truly answered.

Doubt, Past Mere Nihilism

Three hundred years before Nietzsche, the great French philosopher René Descartes set

out on an intellectual mission to take his doubt seriously, to break things apart, to get to

what was essential—to see if he could establish, or discover, a single proposition

impervious to his skepticism. He was searching for the foundation stone on which proper

Being could be established. Descartes found it, as far as he was concerned, in the “I” who

thinks—the “I” who was aware—as expressed in his famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum* (I

think, therefore I am). But that “I” had been conceptualized long before. Thousands of

years ago, the aware “I” was the all-seeing eye of Horus, the great Egyptian son-and-sun-

god, who renewed the state by attending to and then confronting its inevitable

corruption. Before that, it was the creator-God Marduk of the Mesopotamians, whose

eyes encircled his head and who spoke forth words of world-engendering magic. During

the Christian epoch, the “I” transformed into the Logos, the Word that speaks order into

Being at the beginning of time. It might be said that Descartes merely secularized the

Logos, turning it, more explicitly, into “that which is aware and thinks.” That’s the

modern self, simply put. But what exactly is that self?

We can understand, to some degree, its horrors, if we wish to, but its goodness remains

more difficult to define. The self is the great actor of evil who strode about the stage of

Being as Nazi and Stalinist alike; who produced Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, and the

multiplicity of the Soviet gulags. And all of that must be considered with dread

seriousness. But what is its opposite? What is the good that is the necessary counterpart

of that evil; that is made more corporeal and comprehensible by the very existence of that

evil? And here we can state with conviction and clarity that even the rational intellect—

that faculty so beloved of those who hold traditional wisdom in contempt—is at

minimum something closely and necessarily akin to the archetypal dying and eternally

resurrected god, the eternal savior of humanity, the Logos itself. The philosopher of

science Karl Popper, certainly no mystic, regarded thinking itself as a logical extension of

the Darwinian process. A creature that cannot think must solely embody its Being. It can

merely act out its nature, concretely, in the here-and-now. If it cannot manifest in its

behavior what the environment demands while doing so, it will simply die. But that is not

true of human beings. We can produce abstracted representations of potential modes of

Being. We can produce an idea in the theatre of the imagination. We can test it out

against our other ideas, the ideas of others, or the world itself. If it falls short, we can let

it go. We can, in Popper's formulation, let our ideas die in our stead.[147] Then the

essential part, the creator of those ideas, can continue onward, now untrammeled, by

comparison, with error. *Faith in the part of us that continues across those deaths is a prerequisite*

to thinking itself.

Now, an idea is not the same thing as a fact. A fact is something that is dead, in and of

itself. It has no consciousness, no will to power, no motivation, no action. There are

billions of dead facts. The internet is a graveyard of dead facts. But an idea that grips a

person is alive. It wants to express itself, to live in the world. It is for this reason that the

depth psychologists—Freud and Jung paramount among them—insisted that the human

psyche was a battleground for ideas. *An idea has an aim. It wants something. It posits a value*

structure. An idea believes that what it is aiming for is better than what it has now. It

reduces the world to those things that aid or impede its realization, and it reduces

everything else to irrelevance. An idea defines figure against ground. *An idea is a*

personality, not a fact. When it manifests itself within a person, it has a strong proclivity to

make of that person its avatar: to impel that person to act it out. Sometimes, that

impulsion (possession is another word) can be so strong that the person will die, rather

than allowing the idea to perish. This is, generally speaking, a bad decision, given that it

is often the case that only the idea need die, and that the person with the idea can stop

being its avatar, change his or her ways, and continue.

To use the dramatic conceptualization of our ancestors: It is the most fundamental

convictions that must die—must be sacrificed—when the relationship with God has been

disrupted (when the presence of undue and often intolerable suffering, for example,

indicates that something has to change). This is to say nothing other than that the future

can be made better if the proper sacrifices take place in the present. No other animal has

ever figured this out, and it took us untold hundreds of thousands of years to do it. It

took further eons of observation and hero-worship, and then millennia of study, to distill

that idea into a story. It then took additional vast stretches of time to assess that story, to

incorporate it, so that we now can simply say, “If you are disciplined and privilege the

future over the present you can change the structure of reality in your favour.”

But how best to do that?

In 1984, I started down the same road as Descartes. I did not know it was the same

road at the time, and I am not claiming kinship with Descartes, who is rightly regarded as

one of the greatest philosophers of all time. But I was truly plagued with doubt. I had

outgrown the shallow Christianity of my youth by the time I could understand the

fundamentals of Darwinian theory. After that, I could not distinguish the basic elements

of Christian belief from wishful thinking. The socialism that soon afterward became so

attractive to me as an alternative proved equally insubstantial; with time, I came to

understand, through the great George Orwell, that much of such thinking found its

motivation in hatred of the rich and successful, instead of true regard for the poor.

Besides, the socialists were more intrinsically capitalist than the capitalists. They believed

just as strongly in money. They just thought that if different people had the money, the

problems plaguing humanity would vanish. This is simply untrue. There are many

problems that money does not solve, and others that it makes worse. Rich people still

divorce each other, and alienate themselves from their children, and suffer from

existential angst, and develop cancer and dementia, and die alone and unloved.

Recovering addicts cursed with money blow it all in a frenzy of snorting and drunkenness.

And boredom weighs heavily on people who have nothing to do.

I was simultaneously tormented by the fact of the Cold War. It obsessed me. It gave me

nightmares. It drove me into the desert, into the long night of the human soul. I could not

understand how it had come to pass that the world's two great factions aimed mutual

assured destruction at each other. Was one system just as arbitrary and corrupt as the

other? Was it a mere matter of opinion? Were all value structures merely the clothing of

power?

Was everyone crazy?

Just exactly what happened in the twentieth century, anyway? How was it that so many

tens of millions had to die, sacrificed to the new dogmas and ideologies? How was it that

we discovered something worse, much worse, than the aristocracy and corrupt religious

beliefs that communism and fascism sought so rationally to supplant? No one had

answered those questions, as far as I could tell. Like Descartes, I was plagued with doubt.

I searched for one thing—anything—I could regard as indisputable. I wanted a rock upon

which to build my house. It was doubt that led me to it.

I once read of a particularly insidious practice at Auschwitz. A guard would force an

inmate to carry a hundred-pound sack of wet salt from one side of the large compound to

the other—and then to carry it back. *Arbeit macht frei*, said the sign over the camp entrance

—"Work will set you free"—and the freedom was death. Carrying the salt was an act of

pointless torment. It was a piece of malevolent art. It allowed me to realize with certainty

that some actions are wrong.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, definitively and profoundly, about the horrors of the

twentieth century, the tens of millions who were stripped of employment, family, identity

and life. In his *Gulag Archipelago*, in the second part of the second volume, he discussed

the Nuremburg trials, which he considered the most significant event of the twentieth

century. The conclusion of those trials? *There are some actions that are so intrinsically terrible*

that they run counter to the proper nature of human Being. This is true essentially, cross-

culturally—across time and place. *These are evil actions. No excuses are available for engaging in*

them. To dehumanize a fellow being, to reduce him or her to the status of a parasite, to

torture and to slaughter with no consideration of individual innocence or guilt, to make

an art form of pain—that is wrong.

What can I not doubt? The reality of suffering. It brooks no arguments. Nihilists cannot

undermine it with skepticism. Totalitarians cannot banish it. Cynics cannot escape from

its reality. Suffering is real, and the artful infliction of suffering on another, for its own

sake, is wrong. That became the cornerstone of my belief. Searching through the lowest

reaches of human thought and action, understanding my own capacity to act like a Nazi

prison guard or a gulag archipelago trustee or a torturer of children in a dungeon, I

grasped what it meant to "take the sins of the world onto oneself." Each human being has

an immense capacity for evil. Each human being understands, *a priori*, perhaps not what is

good, but certainly what is not. And if there is something that *is not good*, then there is

something that *is good*. If the worst sin is the torment of others, merely for the sake of the

suffering produced—then the good is whatever is diametrically opposed to that. The good

is whatever stops such things from happening.

Meaning as the Higher Good

It was from this that I drew my fundamental moral conclusions. Aim up. Pay attention.

Fix what you can fix. Don't be arrogant in your knowledge. Strive for humility, because

totalitarian pride manifests itself in intolerance, oppression, torture and death. Become

aware of your own insufficiency—your cowardice, malevolence, resentment and hatred.

Consider the murderousness of your own spirit before you dare accuse others, and before

you attempt to repair the fabric of the world. Maybe it's not the world that's at fault.

Maybe it's you. You've failed to make the mark. You've missed the target. You've fallen

short of the glory of God. You've sinned. And all of that is your contribution to the

insufficiency and evil of the world. And, above all, don't lie. Don't lie about anything,

ever. Lying leads to Hell. It was the great and the small lies of the Nazi and Communist

states that produced the deaths of millions of people.

Consider then that the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering is a good. Make

that an axiom: to the best of my ability I will act in a manner that leads to the alleviation

of unnecessary pain and suffering. You have now placed at the pinnacle of your moral

hierarchy a set of presuppositions and actions aimed at the betterment of Being. Why?

Because we know the alternative. The alternative was the twentieth century. The

alternative was so close to Hell that the difference is not worth discussing. And the

opposite of Hell is Heaven. To place the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering at

the pinnacle of your hierarchy of value is to work to bring about the Kingdom of God on

Earth. That's a state, and a state of mind, at the same time.

Jung observed that the construction of such a moral hierarchy was inevitable —although

it could remain poorly arranged and internally self-contradictory. For Jung, whatever was

at the top of an individual's moral hierarchy was, for all intents and purposes, that

person's ultimate value, that person's god. It was what the person acted out. It was what

the person believed most deeply. Something enacted is not a fact, or even a set of facts.

Instead, it's a personality—or, more precisely, a choice between two opposing

personalities. It's Sherlock Holmes or Moriarty. It's Batman or the Joker. It's Superman or

Lex Luthor, Charles Francis Xavier or Magneto, and Thor or Loki. It's Abel or Cain—and

it's Christ or Satan. If it's working for the ennobling of Being, for the establishment of

Paradise, then it's Christ. If it's working for the destruction of Being, for the generation

and propagation of unnecessary suffering and pain, then it's Satan. That's the inescapable,

archetypal reality.

Expedience is the following of blind impulse. It's short-term gain. It's narrow, and

selfish. It lies to get its way. It takes nothing into account. It's immature and

irresponsible. Meaning is its mature replacement. Meaning emerges when impulses are

regulated, organized and unified. Meaning emerges from the interplay between the

possibilities of the world and the value structure operating within that world. If the value

structure is aimed at the betterment of Being, the meaning revealed will be life-

sustaining. It will provide the antidote for chaos and suffering. It will make everything

matter. It will make everything better.

If you act properly, your actions allow you to be psychologically integrated now, and

tomorrow, and into the future, while you benefit yourself, your family, and the broader

world around you. Everything will stack up and align along a single axis. Everything will

come together. This produces maximal meaning. This stacking up is a place in space and

time whose existence we can detect with our ability to experience more than is simply

revealed here and now by our senses, which are obviously limited to their information-

gathering and representational capacity. Meaning trumps expedience. Meaning gratifies

all impulses, now and forever. That's why we can detect it.

If you decide that you are not justified in your resentment of Being, despite its inequity

and pain, you may come to notice things you could fix to reduce even by a bit some

unnecessary pain and suffering. You may come to ask yourself, "What should I do today?"

in a manner that means "How could I use my time to make things better, instead of

worse?" Such tasks may announce themselves as the pile of undone paperwork that you

could attend to, the room that you could make a bit more welcoming, or the meal that

could be a bit more delicious and more gratefully delivered to your family.

You may find that if you attend to these moral obligations, once you have placed "make

the world better" at the top of your value hierarchy, you experience ever-deepening

meaning. It's not bliss. It's not happiness. It is something more like atonement for the

criminal fact of your fractured and damaged Being. It's payment of the debt you owe for

the insane and horrible miracle of your existence. It's how you remember the Holocaust.

It's how you make amends for the pathology of history. It's adoption of the responsibility

for being a potential denizen of Hell. It is willingness to serve as an angel of Paradise.

Expedience—that's hiding all the skeletons in the closet. That's covering the blood you

just spilled with a carpet. That's avoiding responsibility. It's cowardly, and shallow, and

wrong. It's wrong because mere expedience, multiplied by many repetitions, produces the

character of a demon. It's wrong because expedience merely transfers the curse on your

head to someone else, or to your future self, in a manner that will make your future, and

the future generally, worse instead of better.

There is no faith and no courage and no sacrifice in doing what is expedient. There is

no careful observation that actions and presuppositions matter, or that the world is made

of what matters. To have meaning in your life is better than to have what you want,

because you may neither know what you want, nor what you truly need. Meaning is

something that comes upon you, of its own accord. You can set up the preconditions, you

can follow meaning, when it manifests itself, but you cannot simply produce it, as an act

of will. Meaning signifies that you are in the right place, at the right time, properly

balanced between order and chaos, where everything lines up as best it can at that

moment.

What is expedient works only for the moment. It's immediate, impulsive and limited.

What is meaningful, by contrast, is the organization of what would otherwise merely be

expedient into a symphony of Being. Meaning is what is put forth more powerfully than

mere words can express by Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," a triumphant bringing forth from

the void of pattern after pattern upon beautiful pattern, every instrument playing its part,

disciplined voices layered on top of that, spanning the entire breadth of human emotion

from despair to exhilaration.

Meaning is what manifests itself when the many levels of Being arrange themselves into

a perfectly functioning harmony, from atomic microcosm to cell to organ to individual to

society to nature to cosmos, so that action at each level beautifully and perfectly facilitates

action at all, such that past, present and future are all at once redeemed and reconciled.

Meaning is what emerges beautifully and profoundly like a newly formed rosebud opening

itself out of nothingness into the light of sun and God. Meaning is the lotus striving

upward through the dark lake depths through the ever-clearing water, blooming forth on

the very surface, revealing within itself the Golden Buddha, himself perfectly integrated,

such that the revelation of the Divine Will can make itself manifest in his every word and

gesture.

Meaning is when everything there is comes together in an ecstatic dance of single

purpose—the glorification of a reality so that no matter how good it has suddenly

become, it can get better and better and better more and more deeply forever into the

future. Meaning happens when that dance has become so intense that all the horrors of

the past, all the terrible struggle engaged in by all of life and all of humanity to that

moment becomes a necessary and worthwhile part of the increasingly successful attempt

to build something truly Mighty and Good.

Meaning is the ultimate balance between, on the one hand, the chaos of transformation

and possibility and on the other, the discipline of pristine order, whose purpose is to

produce out of the attendant chaos a new order that will be even more immaculate, and

capable of bringing forth a still more balanced and productive chaos and order. Meaning is

the Way, the path of life more abundant, the place you live when you are guided by Love

and speaking Truth and when nothing you want or could possibly want takes any

precedence over precisely that.

Do what is meaningful, not what is expedient.

R U L E 8

TELL THE TRUTH—OR, AT LEAST, DON'T LIE

TRUTH IN NO-MAN'S-LAND

I trained to become a clinical psychologist at McGill University, in Montreal. While doing

so, I sometimes met my classmates on the grounds of Montreal's Douglas Hospital,

where we had our first direct experiences with the mentally ill. The Douglas occupies

acres of land and dozens of buildings. Many are connected by underground tunnels to

protect workers and patients from the interminable Montreal winters. The hospital once

sheltered hundreds of long-term in-house patients. This was before anti-psychotic drugs

and the large scale deinstitutionalization movements of the late sixties all but closed

down the residential asylums, most often dooming the now "freed" patients to a much

harder life on the streets. By the early eighties, when I first visited the grounds, all but the

most seriously afflicted residents had been discharged. Those who remained were strange,

much-damaged people. They clustered around the vending machines scattered

throughout the hospital's tunnels. They looked as if they had been photographed by

Diane Arbus or painted by Hieronymus Bosch.

One day my classmates and I were all standing in line. We were awaiting further

instruction from the strait-laced German psychologist who ran the Douglas clinical

training program. A long-term inpatient, fragile and vulnerable, approached one of the

other students, a sheltered, conservative young woman. The patient spoke to her in a

friendly, childlike manner, and asked, “Why are you all standing here? What are you

doing? Can I come along with you?” My classmate turned to me and asked uncertainly,

“What should I say to her?” She was taken aback, just as I was, by this request coming

from someone so isolated and hurt. Neither of us wanted to say anything that might be

construed as a rejection or reprimand.

We had temporarily entered a kind of no-man’s-land, in which society offers no ground

rules or guidance. We were new clinical students, unprepared to be confronted on the

grounds of a mental hospital by a schizophrenic patient asking a naive, friendly question

about the possibility of social belonging. The natural conversational give-and-take

between people attentive to contextual cues was not happening here, either. What exactly

were the rules, in such a situation, far outside the boundaries of normal social

interaction? What exactly were the options?

There were only two, as far as I could quickly surmise. I could tell the patient a story

designed to save everyone's face, or I could answer truthfully. "We can only take eight

people in our group," would have fallen into the first category, as would have, "We are

just leaving the hospital now." Neither of these answers would have bruised any feelings,

at least on the surface, and the presence of the status differences that divided us from her

would have gone unremarked. But neither answer would have been exactly true. So, I

didn't offer either.

I told the patient as simply and directly as I could that we were new students, training

to be psychologists, and that she couldn't join us for that reason. The answer highlighted

the distinction between her situation and ours, making the gap between us greater and

more evident. The answer was harsher than a well-crafted white lie. But I already had an

inkling that untruth, however well-meant, can produce unintended consequences. She

looked crestfallen, and hurt, but only for a moment. Then she understood, and it was all

right. That was just how it was.

146

I had had a strange set of experiences a few years before embarking upon my clinical

training. 148 I found myself subject to some rather violent compulsions (none acted upon),

and developed the conviction, in consequence, that I really knew rather little about who I

was and what I was up to. So, I began paying much closer attention to what I was doing—

and saying. The experience was disconcerting, to say the least. I soon divided myself into

two parts: one that spoke, and one, more detached, that paid attention and judged. I soon

came to realize that almost everything I said was untrue. I had motives for saying these

things: I wanted to win arguments and gain status and impress people and get what I

wanted. I was using language to bend and twist the world into delivering what I thought

was necessary. But I was a fake. Realizing this, I started to practise only saying things that

the internal voice would not object to. I started to practise telling the truth—or, at least,

not lying. I soon learned that such a skill came in very handy when I didn't know what to

do. What should you do, when you don't know what to do? Tell the truth. So, that's what

I did my first day at the Douglas Hospital.

Later, I had a client who was paranoid and dangerous. Working with paranoid people is

challenging. They believe they have been targeted by mysterious conspiratorial forces,

working malevolently behind the scenes. Paranoid people are hyper-alert and hyper-

focused. They are attending to non-verbal cues with an intentness never manifest during

ordinary human interactions. They make mistakes in interpretation (that's the paranoia)

but they are still almost uncanny in their ability to detect mixed motives, judgment and

falsehood. You have to listen very carefully and tell the truth if you are going to get a

paranoid person to open up to you.

I listened carefully and spoke truthfully to my client. Now and then, he would describe

blood-curdling fantasies of flaying people for revenge. I would watch how I was reacting. I

paid attention to what thoughts and images emerged in the theatre of my imagination

while he spoke, and I told him what I observed. I was not trying to control or direct his

thoughts or actions (or mine). I was only trying to let him know as transparently as I

could how what he was doing was directly affecting at least one person—me. My careful

attention and frank responses did not mean at all that I remained unperturbed, let alone

approved. I told him when he scared me (often), that his words and behaviour were

misguided, and that he was going to get into serious trouble.

He talked to me, nonetheless, because I listened and responded honestly, even though I

was not encouraging in my responses. He trusted me, despite (or, more accurately,

because of) my objections. He was paranoid, not stupid. He knew his behaviour was

socially unacceptable. He knew that any decent person was likely to react with horror to

his insane fantasies. He trusted me and would talk to me because that's how I reacted.

There was no chance of understanding him without that trust.

Trouble for him generally started in a bureaucracy, such as a bank. He would enter an

institution and attempt some simple task. He was looking to open an account, or pay a

bill, or fix some mistake. Now and then he encountered the kind of non-helpful person

that everyone encounters now and then in such a place. That person would reject the ID

he offered, or require some information that was unnecessary and difficult to obtain.

Sometimes, I suppose, the bureaucratic runaround was unavoidable—but sometimes it

was unnecessarily complicated by petty misuses of bureaucratic power. My client was very

attuned to such things. He was obsessed with honour. It was more important to him than

safety, freedom or belonging. Following that logic (because paranoid people are

impeccably logical), he could never allow himself to be demeaned, insulted or put down,

even a little bit, by anyone. Water did not roll off his back. Because of his rigid and

inflexible attitude, my client's actions had already been subjected to several restraining

orders. Restraining orders work best, however, with the sort of person who would never

require a restraining order.

“I will be your worst nightmare,” was his phrase of choice, in such situations. I have

wished intensely that I could say something like that, after encountering unnecessary

bureaucratic obstacles, but it’s generally best to let such things go. My client meant what

he said, however, and sometimes he really did become someone’s nightmare. He was the

bad guy in *No Country for Old Men*. He was the person you meet in the wrong place, at the

wrong time. If you messed with him, even accidentally, he was going to stalk you, remind

you what you had done, and scare the living daylights out of you. He was no one to lie to.

I told him the truth and that cooled him off.

My Landlord

I had a landlord around that time who had been president of a local biker gang. My wife,

Tammy, and I lived next door to him in his parents’ small apartment building. His

girlfriend bore the marks of self-inflicted injuries characteristic of borderline personality

disorder. She killed herself while we lived there.

Denis, large, strong, French-Canadian, with a grey beard, was a gifted amateur

electrician. He had some artistic talent, too, and was supporting himself making

laminated wood posters with custom neon lights. He was trying to stay sober, after being

released from jail. Still, every month or so, he would disappear on a days-long bender. He

was one of those men who have a miraculous capacity for alcohol; he could drink fifty or

sixty beer in a two-day binge and remain standing the whole time. This may seem hard to

believe, but it's true. I was doing research on familial alcoholism at the time, and it was

not rare for my subjects to report their fathers' habitual consumption of forty ounces of

vodka a day. These patriarchs would buy one bottle every afternoon, Monday through

Friday, and then two on Saturday, to tide them over through the Sunday liquor-store

closure.

Denis had a little dog. Sometimes Tammy and I would hear Denis and the dog out in

the backyard at four in the morning, during one of Denis's marathon drinking sessions,

both of them howling madly at the moon. Now and then, on occasions like that, Denis

would drink up every cent he had saved. Then he would show up at our apartment. We

would hear a knock at night. Denis would be at the door, swaying precipitously, upright,

and miraculously conscious.

He would be standing there, toaster, microwave, or poster in hand. He wanted to sell

these to me so he could keep on drinking. I bought a few things like this, pretending that

I was being charitable. Eventually, Tammy convinced me that I couldn't do it anymore. It

made her nervous, and it was bad for Denis, whom she liked. Reasonable and even

necessary as her request was, it still placed me in a tricky position.

What do you say to a severely intoxicated, violence-prone ex-biker-gang-president with

patchy English when he tries to sell his microwave to you at your open door at two in the

morning? This was a question even more difficult than those presented by the

institutionalized patient or the paranoid flayer. But the answer was the same: the truth.

But you'd bloody well better know what the truth is.

Denis knocked again soon after my wife and I had talked. He looked at me in the direct

skeptical narrow-eyed manner characteristic of the tough, heavy-drinking man who is no

stranger to trouble. That look means, “Prove your innocence.” Weaving slightly back and

forth, he asked—politely—if I might be interested in purchasing his toaster. I rid myself,

to the bottom of my soul, of primate-dominance motivations and moral superiority. I told

him as directly and carefully as I could that I would not. I was playing no tricks. In that

moment I wasn’t an educated, anglophone, fortunate, upwardly-mobile young man. He

wasn’t an ex-con Québécois biker with a blood alcohol level of .24. No, we were two men

of good will trying to help each other out in our common struggle to do the right thing. I

said that he had told me he was trying to quit drinking. I said that it would not be good

for him if I provided him with more money. I said that he made Tammy, whom he

respected, nervous when he came over so drunk and so late and tried to sell me things.

He glared seriously at me without speaking for about fifteen seconds. That was plenty

long enough. He was watching, I knew, for any micro-expression revealing sarcasm,

deceit, contempt or self-congratulation. But I had thought it through, carefully, and I had

only said things I truly meant. I had chosen my words, carefully, traversing a treacherous

swamp, feeling out a partially submerged stone path. Denis turned and left. Not only that,

he remembered our conversation, despite his state of professional-level intoxication. He

didn't try to sell me anything again. Our relationship, which was quite good, given the

great cultural gaps between us, became even more solid.

Taking the easy way out or telling the truth—those are not merely two different

choices. They are different pathways through life. They are utterly different ways of

existing.

Manipulate the World

You can use words to manipulate the world into delivering what you want. This is what it

means to "act politically." This is spin. It's the specialty of unscrupulous marketers,

salesmen, advertisers, pickup artists, slogan-possessed utopians and psychopaths. It's the

speech people engage in when they attempt to influence and manipulate others. It's what

university students do when they write an essay to please the professor, instead of

articulating and clarifying their own ideas. It's what everyone does when they want

something, and decide to falsify themselves to please and flatter. It's scheming and

sloganeering and propaganda.

To conduct life like this is to become possessed by some ill-formed desire, and then to

craft speech and action in a manner that appears likely, rationally, to bring about that end.

Typical calculated ends might include "to impose my ideological beliefs," "to prove that I

am (or was) right," "to appear competent," "to ratchet myself up the dominance

hierarchy," "to avoid responsibility" (or its twin, "to garner credit for others' actions"),

"to be promoted," "to attract the lion's share of attention," "to ensure that everyone likes

me," "to garner the benefits of martyrdom," "to justify my cynicism," "to rationalize my

antisocial outlook," "to minimize immediate conflict," "to maintain my naïveté," "to

capitalize on my vulnerability," "to always appear as the sainted one," or (this one is

particularly evil) "to ensure that it is always my unloved child's fault." These are all

examples of what Sigmund Freud's compatriot, the lesser-known Austrian psychologist

Alfred Adler, called "life-lies." 149

Someone living a life-lie is attempting to manipulate reality with perception, thought

and action, so that only some narrowly desired and pre-defined outcome is allowed to

exist. A life lived in this manner is based, consciously or unconsciously, on two premises.

The first is that current knowledge is sufficient to define what is good, unquestioningly,

far into the future. The second is that reality would be unbearable if left to its own

devices. The first presumption is philosophically unjustifiable. What you are currently

aiming at might not be worth attaining, just as what you are currently doing might be an

error. The second is even worse. It is valid only if reality is intrinsically intolerable and,

simultaneously, something that can be successfully manipulated and distorted. Such

speaking and thinking requires the arrogance and certainty that the English poet John

Milton's genius identified with Satan, God's highest angel gone most spectacularly wrong.

The faculty of rationality inclines dangerously to pride: *all I know is all that needs to be*

known. Pride falls in love with its own creations, and tries to make them absolute.

I have seen people define their utopia and then bend their lives into knots trying to

I have seen people define their utopia and then bend their lives into knots trying to

make it reality. A left-leaning student adopts a trendy, anti-authority stance and spends

the next twenty years working resentfully to topple the windmills of his imagination. An

eighteen-year-old decides, arbitrarily, that she wants to retire at fifty-two. She works for

three decades to make that happen, failing to notice that she made that decision when she

was little more than a child. What did she know about her fifty-two-year-old self, when

still a teenager? Even now, many years later, she has only the vaguest, lowest-resolution

idea of her post-work Eden. She refuses to notice. What did her life mean, if that initial

goal was wrong? She's afraid of opening Pandora's box, where all the troubles of the

world reside. But hope is in there, too. Instead, she warps her life to fit the fantasies of a

sheltered adolescent.

A naively formulated goal transmutes, with time, into the sinister form of the life-lie.

One forty-something client told me his vision, formulated by his younger self: "I see

myself retired, sitting on a tropical beach, drinking margaritas in the sunshine." That's

not a plan. That's a travel poster. After eight margaritas, you're fit only to await the

hangover. After three weeks of margarita-filled days, if you have any sense, you're bored

stiff and self-disgusted. In a year, or less, you're pathetic. It's just not a sustainable

approach to later life. This kind of oversimplification and falsification is particularly

typical of ideologues. They adopt a single axiom: government is bad, immigration is bad,

capitalism is bad, patriarchy is bad. Then they filter and screen their experiences and

insist ever more narrowly that everything can be explained by that axiom. They believe,

narcissistically, underneath all that bad theory, that the world could be put right, if only

they held the controls.

There is another fundamental problem, too, with the life-lie, particularly when it is

based on avoidance. A sin of commission occurs when you do something you know to be

wrong. A sin of omission occurs when you let something bad happen when you could do

something to stop it. The former is regarded, classically, as more serious than the latter—

than avoidance. I'm not so sure.

Consider the person who insists that everything is right in her life. She avoids conflict,

and smiles, and does what she is asked to do. She finds a niche and hides in it. She does

not question authority or put her own ideas forward, and does not complain when

mistreated. She strives for invisibility, like a fish in the centre of a swarming school. But a

secret unrest gnaws at her heart. She is still suffering, because life is suffering. She is

lonesome and isolated and unfulfilled. But her obedience and self-obliteration eliminate

all the meaning from her life. She has become nothing but a slave, a tool for others to

exploit. She does not get what she wants, or needs, because doing so would mean

speaking her mind. So, there is nothing of value in her existence to counter-balance life's

troubles. And that makes her sick.

It might be the noisy troublemakers who disappear, first, when the institution you

serve falters and shrinks. But it's the invisible who will be sacrificed next. Someone

hiding is not someone vital. Vitality requires original contribution. Hiding also does not

save the conforming and conventional from disease, insanity, death and taxes. And hiding

from others also means suppressing and hiding the potentialities of the unrealized self.

And that's the problem.

If you will not reveal yourself to others, you cannot reveal yourself to yourself. That

does not only mean that you suppress who you are, although it also means that. It means

that so much of what you could be will never be forced by necessity to come forward. This

is a biological truth, as well as a conceptual truth. When you explore boldly, when you

voluntarily confront the unknown, you gather information and build your renewed self

out of that information. That is the conceptual element. However, researchers have

recently discovered that new genes in the central nervous system turn themselves on

when an organism is placed (or places itself) in a new situation. These genes code for new

proteins. These proteins are the building blocks for new structures in the brain. This

means that a lot of you is still nascent, in the most physical of senses, and will not be

called forth by stasis. You have to say something, go somewhere and do things to get

turned on. And, if not … you remain incomplete, and life is too hard for anyone

incomplete.

If you say no to your boss, or your spouse, or your mother, when it needs to be said,

then you transform yourself into someone who *can* say no when it needs to be said. If you

say yes when no needs to be said, however, you transform yourself into someone who can

only say yes, even when it is very clearly time to say no. If you ever wonder how perfectly

ordinary, decent people could find themselves doing the terrible things the gulag camp

guards did, you now have your answer. By the time *no* seriously needed to be said, there

was no one left capable of saying it.

If you betray yourself, if you say untrue things, if you act out a lie, you weaken your

character. If you have a weak character, then adversity will mow you down when it

appears, as it will, inevitably. You will hide, but there will be no place left to hide. And

then you will find yourself doing terrible things.

Only the most cynical, hopeless philosophy insists that reality could be improved

through falsification. Such a philosophy judges Being and becoming alike, and deems

them flawed. It denounces truth as insufficient and the honest man as deluded. It is a

philosophy that both brings about and then justifies the endemic corruption of the world.

It is not vision as such, and not a plan devised to achieve a vision, that is at fault under

such circumstances. A vision of the future, the desirable future, is necessary. Such a

vision links action taken now with important, long-term, foundational values. It lends

actions in the present significance and importance. It provides a frame limiting

uncertainty and anxiety.

It's not vision. It is instead willful blindness. It's the worst sort of lie. It's subtle. It

avails itself of easy rationalizations. Willful blindness is the refusal to know something

that could be known. It's refusal to admit that the knocking sound means someone at the

door. It's refusal to acknowledge the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room, the

elephant under the carpet, the skeleton in the closet. It's refusal to admit to error while

pursuing the plan. Every game has rules. Some of the most important rules are implicit.

You accept them merely by deciding to play the game. The first of these rules is that the

game is important. If it wasn't important, you wouldn't be playing it. Playing a game

defines it as important. The second is that moves undertaken during the game are valid if

they help you win. If you make a move and it isn't helping you win, then, by definition,

it's a bad move. You need to try something different. You remember the old joke: insanity

is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results.

If you're lucky, and you fail, and you try something new, you move ahead. If that

doesn't work, you try something different again. A minor modification will suffice in

fortunate circumstances. It is therefore prudent to begin with small changes, and see if

they help. Sometimes, however, the entire hierarchy of values is faulty, and the whole

edifice has to be abandoned. The whole game must be changed. That's a revolution, with

all the chaos and terror of a revolution. It's not something to be engaged in lightly, but

it's sometimes necessary. Error necessitates sacrifice to correct it, and serious error

necessitates serious sacrifice. To accept the truth means to sacrifice—and if you have

rejected the truth for a long time, then you've run up a dangerously large sacrificial debt.

Forest fires burn out deadwood and return trapped elements to the soil. Sometimes,

however, fires are suppressed, artificially. That does not stop the deadwood from

accumulating. Sooner or later, a fire will start. When it does, it will burn so hot that

everything will be destroyed—even the soil in which the forest grows.

The prideful, rational mind, comfortable with its certainty, enamoured of its own

brilliance, is easily tempted to ignore error, and to sweep dirt under the rug. Literary,

existential philosophers, beginning with Søren Kierkegaard, conceived of this mode of

Being as “inauthentic.” An inauthentic person continues to perceive and act in ways his

own experience has demonstrated false. He does not speak with his own voice.

“Did what I want happen? No. Then my aim or my methods were wrong. I still have

something to learn.” That is the voice of authenticity.

“Did what I want happen? No. Then the world is unfair. People are jealous, and too

stupid to understand. It is the fault of something or someone else.” That is the voice of

inauthenticity. It is not too far from there to “they should be stopped” or “they must be

hurt” or “they must be destroyed.” Whenever you hear about something

incomprehensibly brutal, such ideas have manifested themselves.

There is no blaming any of this on unconsciousness, either, or repression. When the

individual lies, he knows it. He may blind himself to the consequences of his actions. He

may fail to analyze and articulate his past, so that he does not understand. He may even

forget that he lied and so be unconscious of that fact. But he was conscious, in the

present, during the commission of each error, and the omission of each responsibility. At

that moment, he knew what he was up to. And the sins of the inauthentic individual

compound and corrupt the state.

Someone power-hungry makes a new rule at your workplace. It's unnecessary. It's

counterproductive. It's an irritant. It removes some of the pleasure and meaning from

your work. But you tell yourself it's all right. It's not worth complaining about. Then it

happens again. You've already trained yourself to allow such things, by failing to react the

first time. You're a little less courageous. Your opponent, unopposed, is a little bit

stronger. The institution is a little bit more corrupt. The process of bureaucratic

stagnation and oppression is underway, and you've contributed, by pretending that it was

OK. Why not complain? Why not take a stand? If you do, other people, equally afraid to

speak up, may come to your defence. And if not—maybe it's time for a revolution. Maybe

you should find a job somewhere else, where your soul is less in danger from corruption.

For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark

8:36)

One of the major contributions of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's masterwork, *The Gulag*

Archipelago, was his analysis of the direct causal relationship between the pathology of the

Soviet prison-work-camp dependent state (where millions suffered and died) and the

almost universal proclivity of the Soviet citizen to falsify his own day-to-day personal

experience, deny his own state-induced suffering, and thereby prop up the dictates of the

rational, ideology-possessed communist system. It was this bad faith, this denial, that in

Solzhenitsyn's opinion aided and abetted that great paranoid mass-murderer, Joseph

Stalin, in his crimes. Solzhenitsyn wrote the truth, his truth, hard-learned through his

own experiences in the camps, exposing the lies of the Soviet state. No educated person

dared defend that ideology again after Solzhenitsyn published *The Gulag Archipelago*. No

one could ever say again, “What Stalin did, that was not true communism.”

Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist and Nazi concentration camp survivor who wrote the

classic *Man’s Search for Meaning*, drew a similar social-psychological conclusion: *deceitful,*

inauthentic individual existence is the precursor to social totalitarianism. Sigmund Freud, for his

part, analogously believed that “repression” contributed in a non-trivial manner to the

development of mental illness (and the difference between repression of truth and a lie is

a matter of degree, not kind). Alfred Adler knew it was lies that bred sickness. C.G. Jung

knew that moral problems plagued his patients, and that such problems were caused by

untruth. All these thinkers, all centrally concerned with pathology both individual and

cultural, came to the same conclusion: lies warp the structure of Being. Untruth corrupts

the soul and the state alike, and one form of corruption feeds the other.

I have repeatedly observed the transformation of mere existential misery into outright

hell by betrayal and deceit. The barely manageable crisis of a parent's terminal illness can

be turned, for example, into something awful beyond description by the unseemly and

petty squabbling of the sufferer's adult children. Obsessed by the unresolved past, they

gather like ghouls around the deathbed, forcing tragedy into an unholy dalliance with

cowardice and resentment.

The inability of a son to thrive independently is exploited by a mother bent on shielding

her child from all disappointment and pain. He never leaves, and she is never lonely. It's

an evil conspiracy, forged slowly, as the pathology unfolds, by thousands of knowing

winks and nods. She plays the martyr, doomed to support her son, and garners

nourishing sympathy, like a vampire, from supporting friends. He broods in his basement,

imagining himself oppressed. He fantasizes with delight about the havoc he might wreak

on the world that rejected him for his cowardice, awkwardness and inability. And

sometimes he wreaks precisely that havoc. And everyone asks, "Why?" They could know,

but refuse to.

Even well-lived lives can, of course, be warped and hurt and twisted by illness and

infirmity and uncontrollable catastrophe. Depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia,

like cancer, all involve biological factors beyond the individual's immediate control. The

difficulties intrinsic to life itself are sufficient to weaken and overwhelm each of us,

pushing us beyond our limits, breaking us at our weakest point. Not even the best-lived

life provides an absolute defence against vulnerability. But the family that fights in the

ruins of their earthquake-devastated dwelling place is much less likely to rebuild than the

family made strong by mutual trust and devotion. Any natural weakness or existential

challenge, no matter how minor, can be magnified into a serious crisis with enough deceit

in the individual, family or culture.

The honest human spirit may continually fail in its attempts to bring about Paradise on

Earth. It may manage, however, to reduce the suffering attendant on existence to bearable

levels. The tragedy of Being is the consequence of our limitations and the vulnerability

defining human experience. It may even be the price we pay for Being itself —since

existence must be limited, to be at all.

I have seen a husband adapt honestly and courageously while his wife descended into

terminal dementia. He made the necessary adjustments, step by step. He accepted help

when he needed it. He refused to deny her sad deterioration and in that manner adapted

gracefully to it. I saw the family of that same woman come together in a supporting and

sustaining manner as she lay dying, and gain newfound connections with each other—

brother, sisters, grandchildren and father—as partial but genuine compensation for their

loss. I have seen my teenage daughter live through the destruction of her hip and her

ankle and survive two years of continual, intense pain and emerge with her spirit intact. I

watched her younger brother voluntarily and without resentment sacrifice many

opportunities for friendship and social engagement to stand by her and us while she

suffered. With love, encouragement, and character intact, a human being can be resilient

beyond imagining. What cannot be borne, however, is the absolute ruin produced by

tragedy and deception.

The capacity of the rational mind to deceive, manipulate, scheme, trick, falsify,

minimize, mislead, betray, prevaricate, deny, omit, rationalize, bias, exaggerate and

obscure is so endless, so remarkable, that centuries of pre-scientific thought,

concentrating on clarifying the nature of moral endeavour, regarded it as positively

demonic. This is not because of rationality itself, as a process. That process can produce

clarity and progress. It is because rationality is subject to the single worst temptation—to

raise what it knows now to the status of an absolute.

We can turn to the great poet John Milton, once again, to clarify just what this means.

Over thousands of years of history, the Western world wrapped a dream-like fantasy

about the nature of evil around its central religious core. That fantasy had a protagonist,

an adversarial personality, absolutely dedicated to the corruption of Being. Milton took it

upon himself to organize, dramatize and articulate the essence of this collective dream,

and gave it life, in the figure of Satan—Lucifer, the “light bearer.” He writes of Lucifer’s

primal temptation, and its immediate consequences:150

He trusted to have equaled the most High,

If he opposed; and with ambitious aim

Against the Throne and Monarchy of God

Raised impious War in Heaven and Battel proud

With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power

Hurled headlong flaming from the Ethereal Sky

With hideous ruin and combustion down

To bottomless perdition, there to dwell

In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire …

Lucifer, in Milton’s eyes—the spirit of reason—was the most wondrous angel brought

forth from the void by God. This can be read psychologically. Reason is something alive. It

lives in all of us. It’s older than any of us. It’s best understood as a personality, not a

faculty. It has its aims, and its temptations, and its weaknesses. It flies higher and sees

farther than any other spirit. But reason falls in love with itself, and worse. It falls in love

with its own productions. It elevates them, and worships them as absolutes. Lucifer is,

therefore, the spirit of totalitarianism. He is flung from Heaven into Hell because such

elevation, such rebellion against the Highest and Incomprehensible, inevitably produces

Hell.

To say it again: it is the greatest temptation of the rational faculty to glorify its own

capacity and its own productions and to claim that in the face of its theories nothing

transcendent or outside its domain need exist. This means that all important facts have

been discovered. This means that nothing important remains unknown. But most

importantly, it means denial of the necessity for courageous individual confrontation with

Being. What is going to save you? The totalitarian says, in essence, “You must rely on

faith in what you already know.” But that is not what saves. *What saves is the willingness to*

learn from what you don’t know. That is faith in the possibility of human transformation.

That is faith in the sacrifice of the current self for the self that could be. The totalitarian

denies the necessity for the individual to take ultimate responsibility for Being.

That denial is the meaning of rebellion against “the most High.” That is what

totalitarian means: Everything that needs to be discovered has been discovered. Everything

will unfold precisely as planned. All problems will vanish, forever, once the perfect system

is accepted. Milton’s great poem was a prophecy. As rationality rose ascendant from the

ashes of Christianity, the great threat of total systems accompanied it. Communism, in

particular, was attractive not so much to oppressed workers, its hypothetical beneficiaries,

but to intellectuals—to those whose arrogant pride in intellect assured them they were

always right. But the promised utopia never emerged. Instead humanity experienced the

inferno of Stalinist Russia and Mao’s China and Pol Pot’s Cambodia, and the citizens of

those states were required to betray their own experience, turn against their fellow

citizens, and die in the tens of millions.

There is an old Soviet joke. An American dies and goes to hell. Satan himself shows

him around. They pass a large cauldron. The American peers in. It’s full of suffering souls,

burning in hot pitch. As they struggle to leave the pot, low-ranking devils, sitting on the

rim, pitchfork them back in. The American is properly shocked. Satan says, “That’s where

we put sinful Englishmen.” The tour continues. Soon the duo approaches a second

cauldron. It’s slightly larger, and slightly hotter. The American peers in. It is also full of

suffering souls, all wearing berets. Devils are pitchforking would-be escapees back into

this cauldron, as well. “That’s where we put sinful Frenchmen,” Satan says. In the

distance is a third cauldron. It’s much bigger, and is glowing, white hot. The American

can barely get near it. Nonetheless, at Satan’s insistence, he approaches it and peers in. It

is absolutely packed with souls, barely visible, under the surface of the boiling liquid.

Now and then, however, one clambers out of the pitch and desperately reaches for the

rim. Oddly, there are no devils sitting on the edge of this giant pot, but the clamberer

disappears back under the surface anyway. The American asks, “Why are there no

demons here to keep everyone from escaping?" Satan replies, "This is where we put the

Russians. If one tries to escape, the others pull him back in."

Milton believed that stubborn refusal to change in the face of error not only meant

ejection from heaven, and subsequent degeneration into an ever-deepening hell, but the

rejection of redemption itself. Satan knows full well that even if he was willing to seek

reconciliation, and God willing to grant it, he would only rebel again, because he will not

change. Perhaps it is this prideful stubbornness that constitutes the mysterious

unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost:

... Farewell happy Fields

Where Joy for ever dwells: Hail horrors, hail

Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell

Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings

A mind not to be changed by Place or Time. 151

This is no afterlife fantasy. This is no perverse realm of post-existence torture for political

enemies. This is an abstract idea, and abstractions are often more real than what they

represent. The idea that hell exists in some metaphysical manner is not only ancient, and

pervasive; it's true. Hell is eternal. It has always existed. It exists now. It's the most

barren, hopeless and malevolent subdivision of the underworld of chaos, where

disappointed and resentful people forever dwell.

The mind is its own place, and in itself

Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n. 152

...

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n. 153

Those who have lied enough, in word and action, live there, in hell—now. Take a walk

down any busy urban street. Keep your eyes open and pay attention. You will see people

who are there, now. These are the people to whom you instinctively give a wide berth.

These are the people who are immediately angered if you direct your gaze toward them,

although sometimes they will instead turn away in shame. I saw a horribly damaged

street alcoholic do exactly that in the presence of my young daughter. He wanted above

all to avoid seeing his degraded state incontrovertibly reflected in her eyes.

It is deceit that makes people miserable beyond what they can bear. It is deceit that fills

human souls with resentment and vengefulness. It is deceit that produces the terrible

suffering of mankind: the death camps of the Nazis; the torture chambers and genocides

of Stalin and that even greater monster, Mao. It was deceit that killed hundreds of

millions of people in the twentieth century. It was deceit that almost doomed civilization

itself. It is deceit that still threatens us, most profoundly, today.

The Truth, Instead

What happens if, instead, we decide to stop lying? What does this even mean? We are

limited in our knowledge, after all. We must make decisions, here and now, even though

the best means and the best goals can never be discerned with certainty. An aim, an

ambition, provides the structure necessary for action. An aim provides a destination, a

point of contrast against the present, and a framework, within which all things can be

evaluated. An aim defines progress and makes such progress exciting. An aim reduces

anxiety, because if you have no aim everything can mean anything or nothing, and neither

of those two options makes for a tranquil spirit. Thus, we have to think, and plan, and

limit, and posit, in order to live at all. How then to envision the future, and establish our

direction, without falling prey to the temptation of totalitarian certainty?

Some reliance on tradition can help us establish our aims. It is reasonable to do what

other people have always done, unless we have a very good reason not to. It is reasonable

to become educated and work and find love and have a family. That is how culture

maintains itself. But it is necessary to aim at your target, however traditional, with your

eyes wide open. You have a direction, but it might be wrong. You have a plan, but it

might be ill-formed. You may have been led astray by your own ignorance—and, worse,

by your own unrevealed corruption. You must make friends, therefore, with what you

don’t know, instead of what you know. You must remain awake to catch yourself in the

act. You must remove the beam in your own eye, before you concern yourself with the

mote in your brother’s. And in this way, you strengthen your own spirit, so it can tolerate

the burden of existence, and you rejuvenate the state.

The ancient Egyptians had already figured this out thousands of years ago, although

their knowledge remained embodied in dramatic form.154 They worshipped Osiris,

mythological founder of the state and the god of tradition. Osiris, however, was

vulnerable to overthrow and banishment to the underworld by Set, his evil, scheming

brother. The Egyptians represented in story the fact that social organizations ossify with

time, and tend towards willful blindness. Osiris would not see his brother’s true

character, even though he could have. Set waits and, at an opportune moment, attacks.

He hacks Osiris into pieces, and scatters the divine remains through the kingdom. He

sends his brother’s spirit to the underworld. He makes it very difficult for Osiris to pull

himself back together.

Fortunately, the great king did not have to deal with Set on his own. The Egyptians also

worshipped Horus, the son of Osiris. Horus took the twin forms of a falcon, the most

visually acute of all creatures, and the still-famous hieroglyphic single Egyptian eye (as

alluded to in Rule 7). Osiris is tradition, aged and willfully blind. Horus, his son, could

and would, by contrast, see. Horus was the god of attention. That is not the same as

rationality. Because he paid attention, Horus could perceive and triumph against the evils

of Set, his uncle, albeit at great cost. When Horus confronts Set, they have a terrible

battle. Before Set's defeat and banishment from the kingdom, he tears out one of his

nephew's eyes. But the eventually victorious Horus takes back the eye. Then he does

something truly unexpected: *he journeys voluntarily to the underworld and gives the eye to his*

father.

What does this mean? First, that the encounter with malevolence and evil is of

sufficient terror to damage even the vision of a god; second, *that the attentive son can restore*

the vision of his father. Culture is always in a near-dead state, even though it was

established by the spirit of great people in the past. But the present is not the past. The

wisdom of the past thus deteriorates, or becomes outdated, in proportion to the genuine

difference between the conditions of the present and the past. That is a mere consequence

of the passage of time, and the change that passage inevitably brings. But it is also the

case that culture and its wisdom is additionally vulnerable to corruption—to voluntary,

willful blindness and Mephistophelean intrigue. Thus, the inevitable functional decline of

the institutions granted to us by our ancestors is sped along by our misbehavior—our

missing of the mark—in the present.

156

It is our responsibility to see what is before our eyes, courageously, and to learn from it,

even if it seems horrible—even if the horror of seeing it damages our consciousness, and

half-blinds us. The act of seeing is particularly important when it challenges what we

know and rely on, upsetting and destabilizing us. It is the act of seeing that informs the

individual and updates the state. It was for this reason that Nietzsche said that a man's

worth was determined by how much truth he could tolerate. You are by no means only

what you already know. You are also all that which you could know, if you only would.

Thus, you should never sacrifice what you could be for what you are. You should never

give up the better that resides within for the security you already have—and certainly not

when you have already caught a glimpse, an undeniable glimpse, of something beyond.

In the Christian tradition, Christ is identified with the Logos. The Logos is the Word of

God. That Word transformed chaos into order at the beginning of time. In His human

form, Christ sacrificed himself voluntarily to the truth, to the good, to God. In

consequence, He died and was reborn. The Word that produces order from Chaos

sacrifices everything, even itself, to God. That single sentence, wise beyond

comprehension, sums up Christianity. Every bit of learning is a little death. Every bit of

new information challenges a previous conception, forcing it to dissolve into chaos before

it can be reborn as something better. Sometimes such deaths virtually destroy us. In such

cases, we might never recover or, if we do, we change a lot. A good friend of mine

discovered that his wife of decades was having an affair. He didn't see it coming. It

plunged him into a deep depression. He descended into the underworld. He told me, at

one point, "I always thought that people who were depressed should just shake it off. I

didn't have any idea what I was talking about." Eventually, he returned from the depths.

In many ways, he's a new man—and, perhaps, a wiser and better man. He lost forty

pounds. He ran a marathon. He travelled to Africa and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. He

chose rebirth over descent into Hell.

Set your ambitions, even if you are uncertain about what they should be. The better

ambitions have to do with the development of character and ability, rather than status

and power. Status you can lose. You carry character with you wherever you go, and it

allows you to prevail against adversity. Knowing this, tie a rope to a boulder. Pick up the

great stone, heave it in front of you, and pull yourself towards it. Watch and observe

while you move forward. Articulate your experience as clearly and carefully to yourself

and others as you possibly can. In this manner, you will learn to proceed more effectively

and efficiently towards your goal. And, while you are doing this, do not lie. Especially to

yourself.

If you pay attention to what you do and say, you can learn to feel a state of internal

division and weakness when you are misbehaving and misspeaking. It's an embodied

sensation, not a thought. I experience an internal sensation of sinking and division, rather

than solidity and strength, when I am incautious with my acts and words. It seems to be

centred in my solar plexus, where a large knot of nervous tissue resides. I learned to

recognize when I was lying, in fact, by noticing this sinking and division, and then

inferring the presence of a lie. It often took me a long time to ferret out the deception.

Sometimes I was using words for appearance. Sometimes I was trying to disguise my own

true ignorance of the topic at hand. Sometimes I was using the words of others to avoid

the responsibility of thinking for myself.

If you pay attention, when you are seeking something, you will move towards your

goal. More importantly, however, you will acquire the information that allows your goal

itself to transform. A totalitarian never asks, “What if my current ambition is in error?”

He treats it, instead, as the Absolute. It becomes his God, for all intents and purposes. It

constitutes his highest value. It regulates his emotions and motivational states, and

determines his thoughts. All people serve their ambition. In that matter, there are no

atheists. There are only people who know, and don’t know, what God they serve.

If you bend everything totally, blindly and willfully towards the attainment of a goal,

and only that goal, you will never be able to discover if another goal would serve you, and

the world, better. It is this that you sacrifice if you do not tell the truth. If, instead, you

tell the truth, your values transform as you progress. If you allow yourself to be informed

by the reality manifesting itself, as you struggle forward, your notions of what is

important will change. You will reorient yourself, sometimes gradually, and sometimes

suddenly and radically.

Imagine: you go to engineering school, because that is what your parents desire—but it

is not what you want. Working at cross-purposes to your own wishes, you will find

yourself unmotivated, and failing. You will struggle to concentrate and discipline yourself,

but it will not work. Your soul will reject the tyranny of your will (how else could that be

said?). Why are you complying? You may not want to disappoint your parents (although

if you fail you will do exactly that). You may lack the courage for the conflict necessary to

free yourself. You may not want to sacrifice your childish belief in parental omniscience,

wishing devoutly to continue believing that there is someone who knows you better than

you know yourself, and who also knows all about the world. You want to be shielded in

this manner from the stark existential aloneness of individual Being and its attendant

responsibility. This is all very common and understandable. But you suffer because you

are truly not meant to be an engineer.

One day you have had enough. You drop out. You disappoint your parents. You learn to

live with that. You consult only yourself, even though that means you must rely on your

own decisions. You take a philosophy degree. You accept the burden of your own

mistakes. You become your own person. By rejecting your father's vision, you develop

your own. And then, as your parents age, you've become adult enough to be there for

them, when they come to need you. They win, too. But both victories had to be purchased

at the cost of the conflict engendered by your truth. As Matthew 10:34 has it, citing

Christ—emphasizing the role of the spoken Truth: "Think not that I have come to send

peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."

As you continue to live in accordance with the truth, as it reveals itself to you, you will

have to accept and deal with the conflicts that mode of Being will generate. If you do so,

you will continue to mature and become more responsible, in small ways (don't

underestimate their importance) and in large. You will ever more closely approach your

newer and more wisely formulated goals, and become even wiser in their formulation,

when you discover and rectify your inevitable errors. Your conception of what is

important will become more and more appropriate, as you incorporate the wisdom of

your experience. You will quit wildly oscillating and walk ever more directly towards the

good—a good you could never have comprehended if you had insisted despite all evidence

that you were right, absolutely right, at the beginning.

If existence is good, then the clearest and cleanest and most correct relationship with it

is also good. If existence is not good, by contrast, you're lost. Nothing will save you—

certainly not the petty rebellions, murky thinking and obscurantist blindness that

constitute deceit. Is existence good? You have to take a terrible risk to find out. Live in

truth, or live in deceit, face the consequences, and draw your conclusions.

This is the "act of faith" whose necessity was insisted upon by the Danish philosopher

Kierkegaard. You cannot know ahead of time. Even a good example is insufficient for

proof, given the differences between individuals. The success of a good example can

always be attributed to luck. Thus, you have to risk your particular, individual life to find

out. It is this risk that the ancients described as the sacrifice of personal will to the will of

God. It is not an act of submission (at least as submission is currently understood). It is

an act of courage. It is faith that the wind will blow your ship to a new and better port. It

is the faith that Being can be corrected by becoming. It is the spirit of exploration itself.

Perhaps it is better to conceptualize it this way: Everyone needs a concrete, specific goal

—an ambition, and a purpose—to limit chaos and make intelligible sense of his or her

life. But all such concrete goals can and should be subordinated to what might be

considered a meta-goal, which is a way of approaching and formulating goals themselves.

The meta-goal could be “live in truth.” This means, “Act diligently towards some well-

articulated, defined and temporary end. Make your criteria for failure and success timely

and clear, at least for yourself (and even better if others can understand what you are

doing and evaluate it with you). While doing so, however, allow the world and your spirit

to unfold as they will, while you act out and articulate the truth." This is both pragmatic

ambition and the most courageous of faiths.

Life is suffering. The Buddha stated that, explicitly. Christians portray the same

sentiment imagistically, with the divine crucifix. The Jewish faith is saturated with its

remembrance. The equivalence of life and limitation is the primary and unavoidable fact

of existence. The vulnerability of our Being renders us susceptible to the pains of social

judgement and contempt and the inevitable breakdown of our bodies. But even all those

ways of suffering, terrible as they are, are not sufficient to corrupt the world, to transform

it into Hell, the way the Nazis and the Maoists and the Stalinists corrupted the world and

turned it into Hell. For that, as Hitler stated so clearly, you need the lie:155

[I]n the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always

more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in

the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they

themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It

would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could

have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously. Even though the facts which prove this to be so may be

brought clearly to their minds, they will still doubt and waver and will continue to think that there may be some

other explanation.

For the big lie, you first need the little lie. The little lie is, metaphorically speaking, the

bait used by the Father of Lies to hook his victims. The human capacity for imagination

makes us capable of dreaming up and creating alternative worlds. This is the ultimate

source of our creativity. With that singular capacity, however, comes the counterpart, the

opposite side of the coin: we can deceive ourselves and others into believing and acting as

if things are other than we know they are.

And why not lie? Why not twist and distort things to obtain a small gain, or to smooth

things over, or to keep the peace, or to avoid hurt feelings? Reality has its terrible aspect:

do we really need to confront its snake-headed face in every moment of our waking

consciousness, and at every turn in our lives? Why not turn away, at least, when looking

is simply too painful?

The reason is simple. *Things fall apart.* What worked yesterday will not necessarily work

today. We have inherited the great machinery of state and culture from our forefathers,

but they are dead, and cannot deal with the changes of the day. *The living can.* We can

open our eyes and modify what we have where necessary and keep the machinery running

smoothly. Or we can pretend that everything is alright, fail to make the necessary repairs,

and then curse fate when nothing goes our way.

Things fall apart: this is one of the great discoveries of humanity. And we speed the

natural deterioration of great things through blindness, inaction and deceit. Without

attention, culture degenerates and dies, and evil prevails.

What you see of a lie when you act it out (and most lies are acted out, rather than told)

is very little of what it actually is. A lie is connected to everything else. It produces the

same effect on the world that a single drop of sewage produces in even the largest crystal

magnum of champagne. It is something best considered live and growing.

159

When the lies get big enough, the whole world spoils. But if you look close enough, the

biggest of lies is composed of smaller lies, and those are composed of still smaller lies—

and the smallest of lies is where the big lie starts. It is not the mere misstatement of fact.

It is instead an act that has the aspect of the most serious conspiracy ever to possess the

race of man. Its seeming innocuousness, its trivial meanness, the feeble arrogance that

gives rise to it, the apparently trivial circumventing of responsibility that it aims at—these

all work effectively to camouflage its true nature, its genuine dangerousness, and its

equivalence with the great acts of evil that man perpetrates and often enjoys. Lies corrupt

the world. Worse, that is their intent.

First, a little lie; then, several little lies to prop it up. After that, distorted thinking to

avoid the shame that those lies produce, then a few more lies to cover up the

consequences of the distorted thinking. Then, most terribly, the transformation of those

now necessary lies through practice into automatized, specialized, structural,

neurologically instantiated “unconscious” belief and action. Then the sickening of

experience itself as action predicated on falsehood fails to produce the results intended. If

you don’t believe in brick walls, you will still be injured when you run headlong into one.

Then you will curse reality itself for producing the wall.

After that comes the arrogance and sense of superiority that inevitably accompanies the

production of successful lies (*hypothetically* successful lies—and that is one of the greatest

dangers: apparently everyone is fooled, so everyone is stupid, except me. Everyone is

stupid and fooled, *by* me—so I can get away with whatever I want). Finally, there is the

proposition: “Being itself is susceptible to my manipulations. Thus, it deserves no

respect.”

That’s things falling apart, like Osiris, severed into pieces. That’s the structure of the

person or the state disintegrating under the influence of a malign force. That’s the chaos

of the underworld emerging, like a flood, to subsume familiar ground. But it's not yet

Hell.

Hell comes later. Hell comes when lies have destroyed the relationship between

individual or state and reality itself. Things fall apart. Life degenerates. Everything

becomes frustration and disappointment. Hope consistently betrays. The deceitful

individual desperately gestures at sacrifice, like Cain, but fails to please God. Then the

drama enters its final act.

Tortured by constant failure, the individual becomes bitter. Disappointment and failure

amalgamate, and produce a fantasy: *the world is bent on my personal suffering, my particular*

undoing, my destruction. I need, I deserve, I must have—my revenge. That's the gateway to

Hell. That's when the underworld, a terrifying and unfamiliar place, becomes misery

itself.

At the beginning of time, according to the great Western tradition, the Word of God

transformed chaos into Being through the act of speech. It is axiomatic, within that

tradition, that man and woman alike are made in the image of that God. We also

transform chaos into Being, through speech. We transform the manifold possibilities of

the future into the actualities of past and present.

To tell the truth is to bring the most habitable reality into Being. Truth builds edifices

that can stand a thousand years. Truth feeds and clothes the poor, and makes nations

wealthy and safe. Truth reduces the terrible complexity of a man to the simplicity of his

word, so that he can become a partner, rather than an enemy. Truth makes the past truly

past, and makes the best use of the future's possibilities. Truth is the ultimate,

inexhaustible natural resource. It's the light in the darkness.

See the truth. Tell the truth.

Truth will not come in the guise of opinions shared by others, as the truth is neither a

collection of slogans nor an ideology. It will instead be personal. Your truth is something

only you can tell, based as it is on the unique circumstances of your life. Apprehend your

personal truth. Communicate it carefully, in an articulate manner, to yourself and others.

This will ensure your security and your life more abundantly now, while you inhabit the

structure of your current beliefs. This will ensure the benevolence of the future, diverging

as it might from the certainties of the past.

The truth springs forth ever anew from the most profound wellsprings of Being. It will

keep your soul from withering and dying while you encounter the inevitable tragedy of

life. It will help you avoid the terrible desire to seek vengeance for that tragedy—part of

the terrible sin of Being, which everything must bear gracefully, just so it can exist.

If your life is not what it could be, try telling the truth. If you cling desperately to an

ideology, or wallow in nihilism, try telling the truth. If you feel weak and rejected, and

desperate, and confused, try telling the truth. In Paradise, everyone speaks the truth. That

is what makes it Paradise.

Tell the truth. Or, at least, don’t lie.

164

R U L E 9

ASSUME THAT THE PERSON YOU ARE LISTENING TO MIGHT

KNOW SOMETHING YOU DON'T

NOT ADVICE

Psychotherapy is not advice. Advice is what you get when the person you're talking with

about something horrible and complicated wishes you would just shut up and go away.

Advice is what you get when the person you are talking to wants to revel in the

superiority of his or her own intelligence. If you weren't so stupid, after all, you wouldn't

have your stupid problems.

Psychotherapy is genuine conversation. Genuine conversation is exploration,

articulation and strategizing. When you're involved in a genuine conversation, you're

listening, and talking—but mostly listening. Listening is paying attention. It's amazing

what people will tell you if you listen. Sometimes if you listen to people they will even tell

you what's wrong with them. Sometimes they will even tell you how they plan to fix it.

Sometimes that helps you fix something wrong with yourself. One surprising time (and

this is only one occasion of many when such things happened), I was listening to

someone very carefully, and she told me within minutes (a) that she was a witch and (b)

that her witch coven spent a lot of its time visualizing world peace together. She was a

long-time lower-level functionary in some bureaucratic job. I would never have guessed

that she was a witch. I also didn't know that witch covens spent any of their time

visualizing world peace. I didn't know what to make of any of it, either, but it wasn't

boring, and that's something.

In my clinical practice, I talk and I listen. I talk more to some people, and listen more to

others. Many of the people I listen to have no one else to talk to. Some of them are truly

alone in the world. There are far more people like that than you think. You don't meet

them, because they are alone. Others are surrounded by tyrants or narcissists or drunks

or traumatized people or professional victims. Some are not good at articulating

themselves. They go off on tangents. They repeat themselves. They say vague and

contradictory things. They're hard to listen to. Others have terrible things happening

around them. They have parents with Alzheimer's or sick children. There's not much time

left over for their personal concerns.

One time a client who I had been seeing for a few months came into my office **fn1** for

her scheduled appointment and, after some brief preliminaries, she announced "I think I

was raped." It is not easy to know how to respond to a statement like that, although there

is frequently some mystery around such events. Often alcohol is involved, as it is in most

sexual assault cases. Alcohol can cause ambiguity. That's partly why people drink.

Alcohol temporarily lifts the terrible burden of self-consciousness from people. Drunk

people know about the future, but they don't care about it. That's exciting. That's

exhilarating. Drunk people can party like there's no tomorrow. But, because there is a

tomorrow—most of the time—drunk people also get in trouble. They black out. They go

to dangerous places with careless people. They have fun. But they also get raped. So, I

immediately thought something like that might be involved. How else to understand “I

think”? But that wasn’t the end of the story. She added an extra detail: “Five times.” The

first sentence was awful enough, but the second produced something unfathomable. Five

times? What could that possibly mean?

My client told me that she would go to a bar and have a few drinks. Someone would

My client told me that she would go to a bar and have a few drinks. Someone would

start to talk with her. She would end up at his place or her place with him. The evening

would proceed, inevitably, to its sexual climax. The next day she would wake up,

uncertain about what happened—uncertain about her motives, uncertain about his

motives, and uncertain about the world. Miss S, we’ll call her, was vague to the point of

non-existence. She was a ghost of a person. She dressed, however, like a professional. She

knew how to present herself, for first appearances. In consequence, she had finagled her

way onto a government advisory board considering the construction of a major piece of

transportation infrastructure (even though she knew nothing about government, advising

or construction). She also hosted a local public-access radio show dedicated to small

business, even though she had never held a real job, and knew nothing about being an

entrepreneur. She had been receiving welfare payments for the entirety of her adulthood.

Her parents had never provided her with a minute of attention. She had four brothers

and they were not at all good to her. She had no friends now, and none in the past. She

had no partner. She had no one to talk to, and she didn't know how to think on her own

(that's not rare). She had no self. She was, instead, a walking cacophony of unintegrated

experiences. I had tried previously to help her find a job. I asked her if she had a CV. She

said yes. I asked her to bring it to me. She brought it to our next session. It was fifty

pages long. It was in a file folder box, divided into sections, with manila tag separators—

the ones with the little colorful index-markers on the sides. The sections included such

topics as “My Dreams” and “Books I Have Read.” She had written down dozens of her

night-time dreams in the “My Dreams” section, and provided brief summaries and

reviews of her reading material. This was what she proposed to send to prospective

employers (or perhaps already had: who really knew?). It is impossible to understand how

much someone has to be no one at all to exist in a world where a file folder box

containing fifty indexed pages listing dreams and novels constitutes a CV. Miss S knew

nothing about herself. She knew nothing about other individuals. She knew nothing

about the world. She was a movie played out of focus. And she was desperately waiting

for a story about herself to make it all make sense.

If you add some sugar to cold water, and stir it, the sugar will dissolve. If you heat up

that water, you can dissolve more. If you heat the water to boiling, you can add a lot more

sugar and get that to dissolve too. Then, if you take that boiling sugar water, and slowly

cool it, and don’t bump it or jar it, you can trick it (I don’t know how else to phrase this)

into holding a lot more dissolved sugar than it would have it if it had remained cold all

along. That's called a super-saturated solution. If you drop a single crystal of sugar into

that super-saturated solution, all the excess sugar will suddenly and dramatically

crystallize. It's as if it were crying out for order. That was my client. People like her are

the reason that the many forms of psychotherapy currently practised all work. People can

be so confused that their psyches will be ordered and their lives improved by the adoption

of any reasonably orderly system of interpretation. This is the bringing together of the

disparate elements of their lives in a disciplined manner—any disciplined manner. So, if

you have come apart at the seams (or if you never have been together at all) you can

restructure your life on Freudian, Jungian, Adlerian, Rogerian or behavioural principles.

At least then you make sense. At least then you're coherent. At least then you might be

good for something, if not good yet for everything. You can't fix a car with an axe, but you

can cut down a tree. That's still something.

At about the same time I was seeing this client, the media was all afire with stories of

recovered memories—particularly of sexual assault. The dispute raged apace: were these

genuine accounts of past trauma? Or were they post-hoc constructs, dreamed up as a

consequence of pressure wittingly or unwittingly applied by incautious therapists,

grasped onto desperately by clinical clients all-too-eager to find a simple cause for all their

trouble? Sometimes, it was the former, perhaps; and sometimes the latter. I understood

much more clearly and precisely, however, how easy it might be to instill a false memory

into the mental landscape as soon as my client revealed her uncertainty about her sexual

experiences. The past appears fixed, but it’s not—not in an important psychological

sense. There is an awful lot to the past, after all, and the way we organize it can be subject

to drastic revision.

Imagine, for example, a movie where nothing but terrible things happen. But, in the

end, everything works out. Everything is resolved. A sufficiently happy ending can change

the meaning of all the previous events. They can all be viewed as worthwhile, given that

ending. Now imagine another movie. A lot of things are happening. They're all exciting

and interesting. But there are a lot of them. Ninety minutes in, you start to worry. "This

is a great movie," you think, "but there are a lot of things going on. I sure hope the

filmmaker can pull it all together." But that doesn't happen. Instead, the story ends,

abruptly, unresolved, or something facile and clichéd occurs. You leave deeply annoyed

and unsatisfied—failing to notice that you were fully engaged and enjoying the movie

almost the whole time you were in the theatre. The present can change the past, and the

future can change the present.

When you are remembering the past, as well, you remember some parts of it and forget

others. You have clear memories of some things that happened, but not others, of

potentially equal import—just as in the present you are aware of some aspects of your

surroundings and unconscious of others. You categorize your experience, grouping some

elements together, and separating them from the rest. There is a mysterious arbitrariness

about all of this. You don't form a comprehensive, objective record. You can't. You just

don't know enough. You just can't perceive enough. You're not objective, either. You're

alive. You're subjective. You have vested interests—at least in yourself, at least usually.

What exactly should be included in the story? Where exactly is the border between

events?

The sexual abuse of children is distressingly common. 156 However, it's not as common

as poorly trained psychotherapists think, and it also does not always produce terribly

damaged adults.157 People vary in their resilience. An event that will wipe one person out

can be shrugged off by another. But therapists with a little second-hand knowledge of

Freud often axiomatically assume that a distressed adult in their practice must have been

subject to childhood sexual abuse. Why else would they be distressed? So, they dig, and

infer, and intimate, and suggest, and overreact, and bias and tilt. They exaggerate the

importance of some events, and downplay the importance of others. They trim the facts to

fit their theory.158 And they convince their clients that they were sexually abused—if they

could only remember. And then the clients start to remember. And then they start to

accuse. And sometimes what they remember never happened, and the people accused are

innocent. The good news? At least the therapist's theory remains intact. That's good—for

the therapist. But there's no shortage of collateral damage. However, people are often

willing to produce a lot of collateral damage if they can retain their theory.

I knew about all this when Miss S came to talk to me about her sexual experiences.

When she recounted her trips to the singles bars, and their recurring aftermath, I thought

a bunch of things at once. I thought, "You're so vague and so non-existent. You're a

denizen of chaos and the underworld. You are going ten different places at the same time.

Anyone can take you by the hand and guide you down the road of their choosing." After

all, if you're not the leading man in your own drama, you're a bit player in someone else's

—and you might well be assigned to play a dismal, lonely and tragic part. After Miss S

recounted her story, we sat there. I thought, “You have normal sexual desires. You’re

extremely lonely. You’re unfulfilled sexually. You’re afraid of men and ignorant of the

world and know nothing of yourself. You wander around like an accident waiting to

happen and the accident happens and that’s your life.”

I thought, “Part of you wants to be taken. Part of you wants to be a child. You were

abused by your brothers and ignored by your father and so part of you wants revenge

upon men. Part of you is guilty. Another part is ashamed. Another part is thrilled and

excited. Who are you? What did you do? What happened?” What was the objective truth?

There was no way of knowing the objective truth. And there never would be. There was

no objective observer, and there never would be. There was no complete and accurate

story. Such a thing did not and could not exist. There were, and are, only partial accounts

and fragmentary viewpoints. But some are still better than others. Memory is not a

description of the objective past. *Memory is a tool*. Memory is the past's guide to the future.

If you remember that something bad happened, and you can figure out why, then you can

try to avoid that bad thing happening again. That's the purpose of memory. It's not "to

remember the past." It's to stop the same damn thing from happening over and over.

I thought, "I could simplify Miss S's life. I could say that her suspicions of rape were

fully justified, and that her doubt about the events was nothing but additional evidence of

her thorough and long-term victimization. I could insist that her sexual partners had a

legal obligation to ensure that she was not too impaired by alcohol to give consent. I

could tell her that she had indisputably been subject to violent and illicit acts, unless she

had consented to each sexual move explicitly and verbally. I could tell her that she was an

innocent victim." I could have told her all that. And it would have been true. And she

would have accepted it as true, and remembered it for the rest of her life. She would have

been a new person, with a new history, and a new destiny.

But I also thought, “I could tell Miss S that she is a walking disaster. I could tell her

that she wanders into a bar like a courtesan in a coma, that she is a danger to herself and

others, that she needs to wake up, and that if she goes to singles bars and drinks too

much and is taken home and has rough violent sex (or even tender caring sex), then what

the hell does she expect?” In other words, I could have told her, in more philosophical

terms, that she was Nietzsche’s “pale criminal”—the person who at one moment dares to

break the sacred law and at the next shrinks from paying the price. And that would have

been true, too, and she would have accepted it as such, and remembered it.

If I had been the adherent of a left-wing, social-justice ideology, I would have told her

the first story. If I had been the adherent of a conservative ideology, I would have told her

the second. And her responses after having been told either the first or the second story

would have proved to my satisfaction and hers that the story I had told her was true—

completely, irrefutably true. And that would have been advice.

Figure It Out for Yourself

I decided instead to listen. I have learned not to steal my clients' problems from them. I

don't want to be the redeeming hero or the *deus ex machina*—not in someone else's story. I

don't want their lives. So, I asked her to tell me what she thought, and I listened. She

talked a lot. When we were finished, she still didn't know if she had been raped, and

neither did I. Life is very complicated.

Sometimes you have to change the way you understand everything to properly

understand a single something. "Was I raped?" can be a very complicated question. The

mere fact that the question would present itself in that form indicates the existence of

infinite layers of complexity—to say nothing of "five times." There are a myriad of

questions hidden inside "Was I raped?": What is rape? What is consent? What

constitutes appropriate sexual caution? How should a person defend herself? Where does

the fault lie? "Was I raped?" is a hydra. If you cut off the head of a hydra, seven more

grow. That's life. Miss S would have had to talk for twenty years to figure out whether she

had been raped. And someone would have had to be there to listen. I started the process,

but circumstances made it impossible for me to finish. She left therapy with me only

somewhat less ill-formed and vague than when she first met me. But at least she didn't

leave as the living embodiment of my damned ideology.

The people I listen to need to talk, because that's how people think. People need to

think. Otherwise they wander blindly into pits. When people think, they simulate the

world, and plan how to act in it. If they do a good job of simulating, they can figure out

what stupid things they shouldn't do. Then they can not do them. Then they don't have

to suffer the consequences. That's the purpose of thinking. But we can't do it alone. We

simulate the world, and plan our actions in it. Only human beings do this. That's how

brilliant we are. We make little avatars of ourselves. We place those avatars in fictional

worlds. Then we watch what happens. If our avatar thrives, then we act like he does, in

the real world. Then we thrive (we hope). If our avatar fails, we don't go there, if we have

any sense. We let him die in the fictional world, so that we don't have to really die in the

present.

Imagine two children talking. The younger one says, "Wouldn't it be fun to climb up on

the roof?" He has just placed a little avatar of himself in a fictional world. But his older

sister objects. She chimes in. "That's stupid," she says. "What if you fall off the roof?

What if Dad catches you?" The younger child can then modify the original simulation,

draw the appropriate conclusion, and let the whole fictional world wither on the vine. Or

not. Maybe the risk is worth it. But at least now it can be factored in. The fictional world

is a bit more complete, and the avatar a bit wiser.

People think they think, but it's not true. It's mostly self-criticism that passes for

thinking. True thinking is rare—just like true listening. Thinking is listening to yourself.

It's difficult. To think, you have to be at least two people at the same time. Then you have

to let those people disagree. Thinking is an internal dialogue between two or more

different views of the world. Viewpoint One is an avatar in a simulated world. It has its

own representations of past, present and future, and its own ideas about how to act. So

do Viewpoints Two, and Three, and Four. Thinking is the process by which these internal

avatars imagine and articulate their worlds to one another. You can't set straw men

against one another when you're thinking, either, because then you're not thinking.

You're rationalizing, post-hoc. You're matching what you want against a weak opponent

so that you don't have to change your mind. You're propagandizing. You're using double-

speak. You're using your conclusions to justify your proofs. You're hiding from the truth.

True thinking is complex and demanding. It requires you to be articulate speaker and

careful, judicious listener, at the same time. It involves conflict. So, you have to tolerate

conflict. Conflict involves negotiation and compromise. So, you have to learn to give and

take and to modify your premises and adjust your thoughts—even your perceptions of the

world. Sometimes it results in the defeat and elimination of one or more internal avatar.

They don’t like to be defeated or eliminated, either. They’re hard to build. They’re

valuable. They’re alive. They like to stay alive. They’ll fight to stay alive. You better listen

to them. If you don’t they’ll go underground and turn into devils and torture you. In

consequence, thinking is emotionally painful, as well as physiologically demanding; more

so than anything else—except not thinking. But you have to be very articulate and

sophisticated to have all of this occur inside your own head. What are you to do, then, if

you aren’t very good at thinking, at being two people at one time? That’s easy. You talk.

But you need someone to listen. A listening person is your collaborator and your

opponent.

A listening person tests your talking (and your thinking) without having to say

anything. A listening person is a representative of common humanity. He stands for the

crowd. Now the crowd is by no means always right, but it’s *commonly* right. It’s *typically*

right. If you say something that takes everyone aback, therefore, you should reconsider

what you said. I say that, knowing full well that controversial opinions are sometimes

correct—sometimes so much so that the crowd will perish if it refuses to listen. It is for

this reason, among others, that the individual is morally obliged to stand up and tell the

truth of his or her own experience. But something new and radical is still almost always

wrong. You need good, even great, reasons to ignore or defy general, public opinion.

That's your culture. It's a mighty oak. You perch on one of its branches. If the branch

breaks, it's a long way down—farther, perhaps, than you think. If you're reading this

book, there's a strong probability that you're a privileged person. You can read. You have

time to read. You're perched high in the clouds. It took untold generations to get you

where you are. A little gratitude might be in order. If you're going to insist on bending the

world to your way, you better have your reasons. If you're going to stand your ground,

you better have your reasons. You better have thought them through. You might

otherwise be in for a very hard landing. You should do what other people do, unless you

have a very good reason not to. If you're in a rut, at least you know that other people have

travelled that path. Out of the rut is too often off the road. And in the desert that awaits

off the road there are highwaymen and monsters.

So speaks wisdom.

A Listening Person

A listening person can reflect the crowd. He can do that without talking. He can do that

merely by letting the talking person listen to himself. That is what Freud recommended.

He had his patients lay on a couch, look at the ceiling, let their minds wander, and say

whatever wandered in. That's his method of *free association*. That's the way the Freudian

psychoanalyst avoids transferring his or her own personal biases and opinions into the

internal landscape of the patient. It was for such reasons that Freud did not face his

patients. He did not want their spontaneous meditations to be altered by his emotional

expressions, no matter how slight. He was properly concerned that his own opinions—

and, worse, his own unresolved problems—would find themselves uncontrollably

reflected in his responses and reactions, conscious and unconscious alike. He was afraid

that he would in such a manner detrimentally affect the development of his patients. It

was for such reasons, as well, that Freud insisted that psychoanalysts be analyzed

themselves. He wanted those who practiced his method to uncover and eliminate some of

their own worst blind spots and prejudices, so they would not practise corruptly. Freud

had a point. He was, after all, a genius. You can tell that because people still hate him.

But there are disadvantages to the detached and somewhat distant approach

recommended by Freud. Many of those who seek therapy desire and need a closer, more

personal relationship (although that also has its dangers). This is in part why I have opted

in my practice for the conversation, instead of the Freudian method—as have most

clinical psychologists.

It can be worthwhile for my clients to see my reactions. To protect them from the

undue influence that might produce, I attempt to set my aim properly, so that my

responses emerge from the appropriate motivation. I do what I can to want the best for

them (whatever that might be). I do my best to want the best, period, as well (because

that is part of wanting the best for my clients). I try to clear my mind, and to leave my

own concerns aside. That way I am concentrating on what is best for my clients, while I

am simultaneously alert to any cues that I might be misunderstanding what that best is.

That's something that has to be negotiated, not assumed on my part. It's something that

has to be managed very carefully, to mitigate the risks of close, personal interaction. My

clients talk. I listen. Sometimes I respond. Often the response is subtle. It's not even

verbal. My clients and I face each other. We make eye contact. We can see each other's

expressions. They can observe the effects of their words on me, and I can observe the

effects of mine on them. They can respond to my responses.

A client of mine might say, "I hate my wife." It's out there, once said. It's hanging in

the air. It has emerged from the underworld, materialized from chaos, and manifested

itself. It is perceptible and concrete and no longer easily ignored. It's become real. The

speaker has even startled himself. He sees the same thing reflected in my eyes. He notes

that, and continues on the road to sanity. “Hold it,” he says. “Back up. That’s too harsh.

Sometimes I hate my wife. I hate her when she won’t tell me what she wants. My mom did

that all the time, too. It drove Dad crazy. It drove all of us crazy, to tell you the truth. It

even drove Mom crazy! She was a nice person, but she was very resentful. Well, at least

my wife isn’t as bad as my mother. Not at all. Wait! I guess my wife is actually pretty

good at telling me what she wants, but I get really bothered when she doesn’t, because

Mom tortured us all half to death being a martyr. That really affected me. Maybe I

overreact now when it happens even a bit. Hey! I’m acting just like Dad did when Mom

upset him! That isn’t me. That doesn’t have anything to do with my wife! I better let her

know.” I observe from all this that my client had failed previously to properly distinguish

his wife from his mother. And I see that he was possessed, unconsciously, by the spirit of

his father. He sees all of that too. Now he is a bit more differentiated, a bit less an

uncarved block, a bit less hidden in the fog. He has sewed up a small tear in the fabric of

his culture. He says, “That was a good session, Dr. Peterson.” I nod. You can be pretty

smart if you can just shut up.

I’m a collaborator and opponent even when I’m not talking. I can’t help it. My

expressions broadcast my response, even when they’re subtle. So, I’m communicating, as

Freud so rightly stressed, even when silent. But I also talk in my clinical sessions. How do

I know when to say something? First, as I said, I put myself in the proper frame of mind. I

aim properly. I want things to be better. My mind orients itself, given this goal. It tries to

produce responses to the therapeutic dialogue that furthers that aim. I watch what

happens, internally. I reveal my responses. That’s the first rule. Sometimes, for example, a

client will say something, and a thought will occur to me, or a fantasy flit through my

mind. Frequently it’s about something that was said by the same client earlier that day, or

during a previous session. Then I tell my client that thought or fantasy. Disinterestedly. I

say, “You said this and I noticed that I then became aware of this.” Then we discuss it.

We try to determine the relevance of meaning of my reaction. Sometimes, perhaps, it’s

about me. That was Freud’s point. But sometimes it is just the reaction of a detached but

positively inclined human being to a personally revealing statement by another human

being. It’s meaningful—sometimes, even, corrective. Sometimes, however, it’s me that

gets corrected.

You have to get along with other people. A therapist is one of those other people. A

good therapist will tell you the truth about what he thinks. (That is not the same thing as

telling you that what he thinks is the truth.) Then at least you have the honest opinion of

at least one person. That’s not so easy to get. That’s not nothing. That’s key to the

psychotherapeutic process: two people tell each other the truth—and both listen.

How Should You Listen?

Carl Rogers, one of the twentieth century’s great psychotherapists, knew something

about listening. He wrote, “The great majority of us cannot listen; we find ourselves

compelled to evaluate, because listening is too dangerous. The first requirement is

courage, and we do not always have it. ”159 He knew that listening could transform people.

171

On that, Rogers commented, “Some of you may be feeling that you listen well to people,

and that you have never seen such results. The chances are very great indeed that your

listening has not been of the type I have described.” He suggested that his readers

conduct a short experiment when they next found themselves in a dispute: “Stop the

discussion for a moment, and institute this rule: ‘Each person can speak up for himself

only after he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately,

and to that speaker’s satisfaction.’ ” I have found this technique very useful, in my private

life and in my practice. I routinely summarize what people have said to me, and ask them

if I have understood properly. Sometimes they accept my summary. Sometimes I am

offered a small correction. Now and then I am wrong completely. All of that is good to

know.

There are several primary advantages to this process of summary. The first advantage is

that I genuinely come to understand what the person is saying. Of this, Rogers notes,

“Sounds simple, doesn’t it? But if you try it you will discover it is one of the most difficult

things you have ever tried to do. If you really understand a person in this way, if you are

willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, you run the risk of

being changed yourself. You might see it his way, you might find yourself influenced in

your attitudes or personality. This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening

prospects most of us can face.” More salutary words have rarely been written.

The second advantage to the act of summary is that it aids the person in consolidation

and utility of memory. Consider the following situation: A client in my practice recounts a

long, meandering, emotion-laden account of a difficult period in his or her life. We

summarize, back and forth. The account becomes shorter. It is now summed up, in the

client’s memory (and in mine) in the form we discussed. It is now a different memory, in

many ways—with luck, a *better* memory. It is now less weighty. It has been distilled;

reduced to the gist. We have extracted the moral of the story. It becomes a description of

the cause and the result of what happened, formulated such that repetition of the tragedy

and pain becomes less likely in the future. "*This* is what happened. *This* is why. *This* is

what I have to do to avoid such things from now on": That's a successful memory. That's

the purpose of memory. You remember the past not so that it is "accurately recorded," to

say it again, but so that you are prepared for the future.

The third advantage to employing the Rogerian method is the difficulty it poses to the

careless construction of straw-man arguments. When someone opposes you, it is very

tempting to oversimplify, parody, or distort his or her position. This is a

counterproductive game, designed both to harm the dissenter and to unjustly raise your

personal status. By contrast, if you are called upon to summarize someone's position, so

that the speaking person agrees with that summary, you may have to state the argument

even more clearly and succinctly than the speaker has even yet managed. If you first give

the devil his due, looking at his arguments from his perspective, you can (1) find the

value in them, and learn something in the process, or (2) hone your positions against

them (if you still believe they are wrong) and strengthen your arguments further against

challenge. This will make you much stronger. Then you will no longer have to

misrepresent your opponent's position (and may well have bridged at least part of the gap

between the two of you). You will also be much better at withstanding your own doubts.

Sometimes it takes a long time to figure out what someone genuinely means when they

are talking. This is because often they are articulating their ideas for the first time. They

can't do it without wandering down blind alleys or making contradictory or even

nonsensical claims. This is partly because talking (and thinking) is often more about

forgetting than about remembering. To discuss an event, particularly something

emotional, like a death or serious illness, is to slowly choose what to leave behind. To

begin, however, much that is not necessary must be put into words. The emotion-laden

speaker must recount the whole experience, in detail. Only then can the central narrative,

cause and consequence, come into focus or consolidate itself. Only then can the moral of

the story be derived.

Imagine that someone holds a stack of hundred-dollar bills, some of which are

counterfeit. All the bills might have to be spread on a table, so that each can be seen, and

any differences noted, before the genuine can be distinguished from the false. This is the

sort of methodical approach you have to take when really listening to someone trying to

solve a problem or communicate something important. If upon learning that some of the

bills are counterfeit you too casually dismiss all of them (as you would if you were in a

hurry, or otherwise unwilling to put in the effort), the person will never learn to separate

wheat from chaff.

If you listen, instead, without premature judgment, people will generally tell you

everything they are thinking—and with very little deceit. People will tell you the most

amazing, absurd, interesting things. Very few of your conversations will be boring. (You

can in fact tell whether or not you are actually listening in this manner. If the

conversation is boring, you probably aren't.)

Primate Dominance–Hierarchy Manoeuvres—and Wit

Not all talking is thinking. Nor does all listening foster transformation. There are other

motives for both, some of which produce much less valuable, counterproductive and even

dangerous outcomes. There is the conversation, for example, where one participant is

speaking merely to establish or confirm his place in the dominance hierarchy. One person

begins by telling a story about some interesting occurrence, recent or past, that involved

something good, bad or surprising enough to make the listening worthwhile. The other

person, now concerned with his or her potentially substandard status as less-interesting

individual, immediately thinks of something better, worse, or more surprising to relate.

This isn't one of those situations where two conversational participants are genuinely

playing off each other, riffing on the same themes, for the mutual enjoyment of both (and

everyone else). This is jockeying for position, pure and simple. You can tell when one of

those conversations is occurring. They are accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment

among speakers and alike, all who know that something false and exaggerated has just

been said.

There is another, closely allied form of conversation, where neither speaker is listening

in the least to the other. Instead, each is using the time occupied by the current speaker

to conjure up what he or she will say next, which will often be something off-topic,

because the person anxiously waiting to speak has not been listening. This can and will

bring the whole conversational train to a shuddering halt. At this point, it is usual for

those who were on board during the crash to remain silent, and look occasionally and in a

somewhat embarrassed manner at each other, until everyone leaves, or someone thinks of

something witty and puts Humpty Dumpty together again.

Then there is the conversation where one participant is trying to attain victory for his

point of view. This is yet another variant of the dominance-hierarchy conversation.

During such a conversation, which often tends toward the ideological, the speaker

endeavours to (1) denigrate or ridicule the viewpoint of anyone holding a contrary

position, (2) use selective evidence while doing so and, finally, (3) impress the listeners

(many of whom are already occupying the same ideological space) with the validity of his

assertions. The goal is to gain support for a comprehensive, unitary, oversimplified world-

view. Thus, the purpose of the conversation is to make the case that *not* thinking is the

correct tack. The person who is speaking in this manner believes that winning the

argument makes him right, and that doing so necessarily validates the assumption-

structure of the dominance hierarchy he most identifies with. This is often—and

unsurprisingly—the hierarchy within which he has achieved the most success, or the one

with which he is most temperamentally aligned. Almost all discussions involving politics

or economics unfold in this manner, with each participant attempting to justify fixed, *a*

priori positions instead of trying to learn something or to adopt a different frame (even for

the novelty). It is for this reason that conservatives and liberals alike believe their

positions to be self-evident, particularly as they become more extreme. Given certain

temperamentally-based assumptions, a predictable conclusion emerges—but only when

you ignore the fact that the assumptions themselves are mutable.

These conversations are very different from the listening type. When a genuine

listening conversation is taking place, one person at a time has the floor, and everyone

else is listening. The person speaking is granted the opportunity to seriously discuss some

event, usually unhappy or even tragic. Everyone else responds sympathetically. These

conversations are important because the speaker is organizing the troublesome event in

his or her mind, while recounting the story. The fact is important enough to bear

repeating: people organize their brains with conversation. If they don't have anyone to tell

their story to, they lose their minds. Like hoarders, they cannot unclutter themselves. The

input of the community is required for the integrity of the individual psyche. To put it

another way: It takes a village to organize a mind.

Much of what we consider healthy mental function is the result of our ability to use the

reactions of others to keep our complex selves functional. *We outsource the problem of our*

sanity. This is why it is the fundamental responsibility of parents to render their children

socially acceptable. If a person's behaviour is such that other people can tolerate him,

then all he has to do is place himself in a social context. Then people will indicate—by

being interested in or bored by what he says, or laughing or not laughing at his jokes, or

teasing or ridiculing, or even by lifting an eyebrow—whether his actions and statements

are what they should be. Everyone is always broadcasting to everyone else their desire to

encounter the ideal. We punish and reward each other precisely to the degree that each of

us behaves in keeping with that desire—except, of course, when we are looking for

trouble.

The sympathetic responses offered during a genuine conversation indicate that the

teller is valued, and that the story being told is important, serious, deserving of

consideration, and understandable. Men and women often misunderstand each other

when these conversations are focused on a specified problem. Men are often accused of

wanting to “fix things” too early on in a discussion. This frustrates men, who like to solve

problems and to do it efficiently and who are in fact called upon frequently by women for

precisely that purpose. It might be easier for my male readers to understand why this

does not work, however, if they could realize and then remember that before a problem

can be solved it must be formulated precisely. Women are often intent on formulating the

problem when they are discussing something, and they need to be listened to —even

questioned—to help ensure clarity in the formulation. Then, whatever problem is left, if

any, can be helpfully solved. (It should also be noted first that too-early problem-solving

may also merely indicate a desire to escape from the effort of the problem-formulating

conversation.)

Another conversational variant is the lecture. A lecture is—somewhat surprisingly—a

conversation. The lecturer speaks, but the audience communicates with him or her non-

verbally. A surprising amount of human interaction—much of the delivery of emotional

information, for example—takes place in this manner, through postural display and facial

emotion (as we noted in our discussion of Freud). A good lecturer is not only delivering

facts (which is perhaps the least important part of a lecture), but also telling stories about

those facts, pitching them precisely to the level of the audience's comprehension, gauging

that by the interest they are showing. The story he or she is telling conveys to the

members of the audience not only what the facts are, but *why* they are relevant—why it is

important to know certain things about which they are currently ignorant. To

demonstrate the importance of some set of facts is to tell those audience members how

such knowledge could change their behaviour, or influence the way they interpret the

world, so that they will now be able to avoid some obstacles and progress more rapidly to

some better goals.

A good lecturer is thus talking *with* and not *at* or even *to* his or her listeners. To manage

this, the lecturer needs to be closely attending to the audience's every move, gesture and

sound. Perversely, *this cannot be done by watching the audience, as such*. A good lecturer

speaks directly to and watches the response of single, identifiable people, **fn2** instead of doing something clichéd, such as "presenting a talk" to an audience. Everything about

that phrase is wrong. You don't present. You talk. There is no such thing as "a talk,"

unless it's canned, and it shouldn't be. There is also no "audience." There are *individuals*,

who need to be included in the conversation. A well-practised and competent public

speaker addresses a single, identifiable person, watches that individual nod, shake his

head, frown, or look confused, and responds appropriately and directly to those gestures

and expressions. Then, after a few phrases, rounding out some idea, he switches to

another audience member, and does the same thing. In this manner, he infers and reacts

to the attitude of the entire group (insofar as such a thing exists).

There are still other conversations that work primarily as demonstrations of wit. These

also have a dominance element, but the goal is to be the most entertaining speaker

(which is an accomplishment that everyone participating will also enjoy). The purpose of

these conversations, as a witty friend of mine once observed, was to say "anything that

was either true or funny." As truth and humour are often close allies, that combination

worked fine. I think that this might be the intelligent blue-collar worker's conversation. I

participated in many fine bouts of sarcasm, satire, insult and generally over-the-top

comedic exchange around among people I grew up with in Northern Alberta and, later,

among some Navy SEALs I met in California, who were friends of an author I know who

writes somewhat horrifying popular fiction. They were all perfectly happy to say anything,

no matter how appalling, as long it was funny.

I attended this writer's fortieth birthday celebration not too long ago in LA. He had

invited one of the aforementioned SEALs. A few months beforehand, however, his wife

had been diagnosed with a serious medical condition, necessitating brain surgery. He

called up his SEAL friend, informed him of the circumstances, and indicated that the

event might have to be cancelled. “You think you guys have a problem,” responded his

friend. “I just bought non-refundable airline tickets to your party!” It’s not clear what

percentage of the world’s population would find that response amusing. I retold the story

recently to a group of newer acquaintances and they were more shocked and appalled

than amused. I tried to defend the joke as an indication of the SEAL’s respect for the

couple’s ability to withstand and transcend tragedy, but I wasn’t particularly successful.

Nonetheless, I believe that he did intend exactly that respect, and I think he was

terrifyingly witty. His joke was daring, anarchic to the point of recklessness, which is

exactly the point where serious funny occurs. My friend and his wife recognized the

compliment. They saw that their friend knew they were tough enough to withstand that

level of—well, let’s call it competitive humour. It was a test of character, which they

passed with flying colours.

I found that such conversations occurred less and less frequently as I moved from

university to university, up the educational and social ladder. Maybe it wasn't a class

thing, although I have my suspicions it was. Maybe it's just that I'm older, or that the

friends a person makes later in life, after adolescence, lack the insane competitive

closeness and perverse playfulness of those early tribal bonds. When I went back up north

to my hometown for my fiftieth birthday party, however, my old friends made me laugh

so hard I had to duck into a different room several times to catch my breath. Those

conversations are the most fun, and I miss them. You have to keep up, or risk severe

humiliation, but there is nothing more rewarding than topping the last comedian's story,

joke, insult or curse. Only one rule really applies: do not be boring (although it is also

very bad form to *actually* put someone down, when you are only *pretending* to put them

down).

Conversation on the Way

The final type of conversation, akin to listening, is a form of mutual exploration. It

requires true reciprocity on the part of those listening and speaking. It allows all

participants to express and organize their thoughts. A conversation of mutual exploration

has a topic, generally complex, of genuine interest to the participants. Everyone

participating is trying to solve a problem, instead of insisting on the *a priori* validity of

their own positions. All are acting on the premise that they have something to learn. This

kind of conversation constitutes active philosophy, the highest form of thought, and the

best preparation for proper living.

The people involved in such a conversation must be discussing ideas they genuinely use

to structure their perceptions and guide their actions and words. They must be

existentially involved with their philosophy: that is, they must be living it, not merely

believing or understanding it. They also must have inverted, at least temporarily, the

typical human preference for order over chaos (and I don’t mean the chaos typical of

mindless antisocial rebellion). Other conversational types—except for the listening type—

all attempt to buttress some existing order. The conversation of mutual exploration, by

contrast, requires people who have decided that the unknown makes a better friend than

the known.

You already know what you know, after all—and, unless your life is perfect, what you

know is not enough. You remain threatened by disease, and self-deception, and

unhappiness, and malevolence, and betrayal, and corruption, and pain, and limitation.

You are subject to all these things, in the final analysis, because you are just too ignorant

to protect yourself. If you just knew enough, you could be healthier and more honest. You

would suffer less. You could recognize, resist and even triumph over malevolence and

evil. You would neither betray a friend, nor deal falsely and deceitfully in business,

politics or love. However, your current knowledge has neither made you perfect nor kept

you safe. So, it is insufficient, by definition—radically, fatally insufficient.

You must accept this before you can converse philosophically, instead of convincing,

oppressing, dominating or even amusing. You must accept this before you can tolerate a

conversation where the Word that eternally mediates between order and chaos is

operating, psychologically speaking. To have this kind of conversation, it is necessary to

respect the personal experience of your conversational partners. You must assume that

they have reached careful, thoughtful, genuine conclusions (and, perhaps, they must have

done the work that justifies this assumption). You must believe that if they shared their

conclusions with you, you could bypass at least some of the pain of personally learning

the same things (as learning from the experience of others can be quicker and much less

dangerous). You must meditate, too, instead of strategizing towards victory. If you fail, or

refuse, to do so, then you merely and automatically repeat what you already believe,

seeking its validation and insisting on its rightness. But if you are meditating as you

converse, then you listen to the other person, and say the new and original things that can

rise from deep within of their own accord.

It's as if you are listening to yourself during such a conversation, just as you are listening to the

other person. You are describing how you are responding to the new information imparted

by the speaker. You are reporting what that information has done to you—what new

things it made appear within you, how it has changed your presuppositions, how it has

made you think of new questions. You tell the speaker these things, directly. Then they

have the same effect on him. In this manner, you both move towards somewhere newer

and broader and better. You both change, as you let your old presuppositions die—as you

shed your skins and emerge renewed.

A conversation such as this is one where it is the desire for truth itself—on the part of

both participants—that is truly listening and speaking. That's why it's engaging, vital,

interesting and meaningful. That sense of meaning is a signal from the deep, ancient parts

of your Being. You're where you should be, with one foot in order, and the other

tentatively extended into chaos and the unknown. You're immersed in the Tao, following

the great Way of Life. There, you're stable enough to be secure, but flexible enough to

transform. There, you're allowing new information to *inform* you—to permeate your

stability, to repair and improve its structure, and expand its domain. There the

constituent elements of your Being can find their more elegant formation. A conversation

like that places you in the same place that listening to great music places you, and for

much the same reason. A conversation like that puts you in the realm where souls

connect, and that's a real place. It leaves you thinking, "That was really worthwhile. We

really got to know each other." The masks came off, and the searchers were revealed.

So, listen, to yourself and to those with whom you are speaking. Your wisdom then

consists not of the knowledge you already have, but the continual search for knowledge,

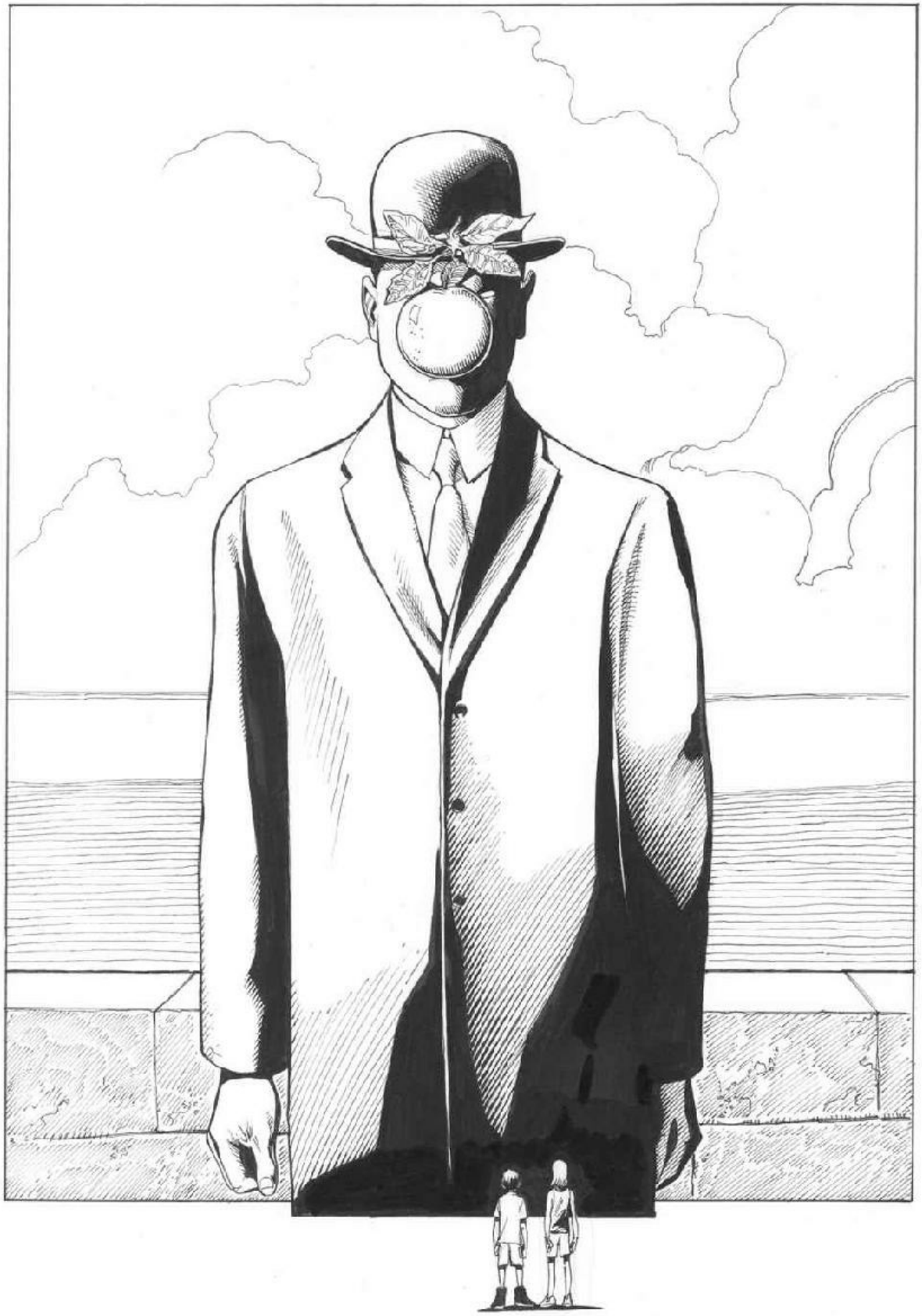
which is the highest form of wisdom. It is for this reason that the priestess of the Delphic

Oracle in ancient Greece spoke most highly of Socrates, who always sought the truth. She

described him as the wisest living man, because he knew that what he knew was nothing.

Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don’t.

177



R U L E 1 0

BE PRECISE IN YOUR SPEECH

WHY IS MY LAPTOP OBSOLETE?

What do you see, when you look at a computer—at your own laptop, more precisely? You

see a flat, thin, grey-and-black box. Less evidently, you see something to type on and look

at. Nonetheless, even with the second perceptions included, what are you seeing is hardly

the computer at all. That grey and black box happens to be a computer right now, right

here and now, and maybe even an expensive computer. Nevertheless, it will soon be

something so unlike a computer that it will be difficult even to give away.

We will all discard our laptops within the next five years, even though they may still

work perfectly—even though the screens, keyboards, mice and internet connections may

still flawlessly perform their tasks. Fifty years from now, early twenty-first-century

laptops will be oddities like the brass scientific tools of the late nineteenth century. The

latter now appear more like the arcane accoutrements of alchemy, designed to measure

phenomena whose existence we no longer even recognize. How can high-tech machines,

each possessing more computing power than the entire Apollo space program, lose their

value in such a short period of time? How can they transform so quickly from exciting,

useful and status-enhancing machines to complex pieces of junk? It's because of the

nature of our perceptions themselves, and the oft-invisible interaction between those

perceptions and the underlying complexity of the world.

Your laptop is a note in a symphony currently being played by an orchestra of

incalculable size. It's a very small part of a much greater whole. Most of its capacity

resides beyond its hard shell. It maintains its function only because a vast array of other

technologies are currently and harmoniously at play. It is fed, for example, by a power

grid whose function is invisibly dependent on the stability of a myriad of complex

physical, biological, economic and interpersonal systems. The factories that make its parts

are still in operation. The operating system that enables its function is based on those

parts, and not on others yet to be created. Its video hardware runs the technology

expected by the creative people who post their content on the web. Your laptop is in

communication with a certain, specified ecosystem of other devices and web servers.

And, finally, all this is made possible by an even less visible element: the social contract

of trust—the interconnected and fundamentally honest political and economic systems

that make the reliable electrical grid a reality. This interdependency of part on whole,

invisible in systems that work, becomes starkly evident in systems that don’t. The higher-

order, surrounding systems that enable personal computing hardly exist at all in corrupt,

third-world countries, so that the power lines, electrical switches, outlets, and all the

other entities so hopefully and concretely indicative of such a grid are absent or

compromised, and in fact make little contribution to the practical delivery of electricity to

people’s homes and factories. This makes perceiving the electronic and other devices that

electricity theoretically enables as separate, functional units frustrating, at minimum, and

impossible, at worst. This is partly because of technical insufficiency: the systems simply

don’t work. But it is also in no small part because of the lack of trust characteristic of

systemically corrupt societies.

To put it another way: What you perceive as your computer is like a single leaf, on a

tree, in a forest—or, even more accurately, like your fingers rubbing briefly across that

leaf. A single leaf can be plucked from a branch. It can be perceived, briefly, as a single,

self-contained entity—but that perception misleads more than clarifies. In a few weeks,

the leaf will crumble and dissolve. It would not have been there at all, without the tree. It

cannot continue to exist, in the absence of the tree. This is the position of our laptops in

relation to the world. So much of what they are resides outside their boundaries that the

screened devices we hold on our laps can only maintain their computer-like façade for a

few short years.

Almost everything we see and hold is like that, although often not so evidently.

Tools, Obstacles and Extension into the World

We assume that we see objects or things when we look at the world, but that's not really

how it is. Our evolved perceptual systems transform the interconnected, complex multi-

level world that we inhabit not so much into *things* per se as into *useful* things (or their

nemeses, things that get in the way). This is the necessary, practical reduction of the

world. This is the transformation of the near-infinite complexity of things through the

narrow specification of our purpose. This is how precision makes the world sensibly

manifest. That is not at all the same as perceiving *objects*.

We don't see valueless entities and then attribute meaning to them. We perceive the

meaning directly. 160 We see floors, to walk on, and doors, to duck through, and chairs, to

sit on. It's for this reason that a beanbag and a stump both fall into the latter category,

despite having little objectively in common. We see rocks, because we can throw them,

and clouds, because they can rain on us, and apples, to eat, and the automobiles of other

people, to get in our way and annoy us. We see tools and obstacles, not objects or things.

Furthermore, we see tools and obstacles at the “handy” level of analysis that makes them

most useful (or dangerous), given our needs, abilities and perceptual limitations. The

world reveals itself to us as something to utilize and something to navigate through—not

as something that merely is.

We see the faces of the people we are talking to, because we need to communicate with

those people and cooperate with them. We don’t see their microcosmic substructures,

their cells, or the subcellular organelles, molecules and atoms that make up those cells.

We don’t see, as well, the macrocosm that surrounds them: the family members and

friends that make up their immediate social circles, the economies they are embedded

within, or the ecology that contains all of them. Finally, and equally importantly, we don’t

see them across time. We see them in the narrow, immediate, overwhelming now, instead

of surrounded by the yesterdays and tomorrows that may be a more important part of

them than whatever is currently and obviously manifest. And we have to see in this way,

or be overwhelmed.

When we look at the world, we perceive only what is enough for our plans and actions

to work and for us to get by. What we inhabit, then, is this "enough." That is a radical,

functional, unconscious simplification of the world—and it's almost impossible for us not

to mistake it for the world itself. But the objects we see are not simply there, in the world,

for our simple, direct perceiving. **fn1** They exist in a complex, multi-dimensional

relationship to one another, not as self-evidently separate, bounded, independent objects.

We perceive not them, but their functional utility and, in doing so, we make them

sufficiently simple for sufficient understanding. *It is for this reason that we must be precise in*

our aim. Absent that, we drown in the complexity of the world.

This is true even for our perceptions of ourselves, of our individual persons. We assume

that we end at the surface of our skin, because of the way that we perceive. But we can

understand with a little thought the provisional nature of that boundary. We shift what is

inside our skin, so to speak, as the context we inhabit changes. Even when we do

something as apparently simple as picking up a screwdriver, our brain automatically

adjusts what it considers body to include the tool. [161] We can literally feel things with the

end of the screwdriver. When we extend a hand, holding the screwdriver, we

automatically take the length of the latter into account. We can probe nooks and crannies

with its extended end, and comprehend what we are exploring. Furthermore, we instantly

regard the screwdriver we are holding as “our” screwdriver, and get possessive about it.

We do the same with the much more complex tools we use, in much more complex

situations. The cars we pilot instantaneously and automatically become ourselves.

Because of this, when someone bangs his fist on our car’s hood after we have irritated

him at a crosswalk, we take it personally. This is not always reasonable. Nonetheless,

without the extension of self into machine, it would be impossible to drive.

The extensible boundaries of our selves also expand to include other people —family

members, lovers and friends. A mother will sacrifice herself for her children. Is our father

or son or wife or husband more or less integral to us than an arm or a leg? We can

answer, in part, by asking: Which we rather lose? Which loss would we sacrifice more to

avoid? We practice for such permanent extension—such permanent commitment—by

identifying with the fictional characters of books and movies. Their tragedies and

triumphs rapidly and convincingly become ours. Sitting still in our seats, we nonetheless

act out a multitude of alternate realities, extending ourselves experimentally, testing

multiple potential paths, before specifying the one we will actually take. Engrossed in a

fictional world, we can even become things that don't "really" exist. In the blink of an eye,

in the magic hall of a movie theatre, we can become fantastical creatures. We sit in the

dark before rapidly flickering images and become witches, superheroes, aliens, vampires,

lions, elves or wooden marionettes. We feel everything they feel, and are peculiarly happy

to pay for the privilege, even when what we experience is sorrow, fear or horror.

Something similar, but more extreme, happens when we identify, not with a character

in a fictional drama, but with a whole group, in a competition. Think of what happens

when a favourite team wins or loses an important game against an arch-rival. The winning

goal will bring the whole network of fans to their feet, before they think, in unscripted

unison. It is as if their many nervous systems are directly wired to the game unfolding in

front of them. Fans take the victories and defeats of their teams very personally, even

wearing the jerseys of their heroes, often celebrating their wins and losses more than any

such events that "actually" occur in their day-to-day lives. This identification manifests

itself deeply—even biochemically and neurologically. Vicarious experiences of winning

and losing, for example, raise and lower testosterone levels among fans "participating" in

the contest.[162] Our capacity for identification is something that manifests itself at every

level of our Being.

To the degree that we are patriotic, similarly, our country is not just *important* to us. It *is*

us. We might even sacrifice our entire smaller individual selves, in battle, to maintain the

integrity of our country. For much of history, such willingness to die has been regarded as

something admirable and courageous, as a part of human duty. Paradoxically, that is a

direct consequence not of our aggression but of our extreme sociability and willingness to

cooperate. If we can become not only ourselves, but our families, teams and countries,

cooperation comes easily to us, relying on the same deeply innate mechanisms that drive

us (and other creatures) to protect our very bodies.

The World Is Simple Only When It Behaves

It is very difficult to make sense of the interconnected chaos of reality, just by looking at

it. It's a very complicated act, requiring, perhaps, half our brains. Everything shifts and

changes in the real world. Each hypothetically separate thing is made up of smaller

hypothetically separate things, and is simultaneously part of larger hypothetically separate

things. The boundaries between the levels—and between different things themselves at a

given level—are neither clear nor self-evident, objectively. They must be established

practically, pragmatically, and they retain their validity only under very narrow and

specified conditions. The conscious illusion of complete and sufficient perception only

sustains itself, for example—only remains sufficient for our purposes—when everything

goes according to plan. Under such circumstances, what we see is accurate enough, so

that there is no utility in looking farther. To drive successfully, we don't have to

understand, or even perceive, the complex machinery of our automobiles. The hidden

complexities of our private cars only intrude on our consciousness when that machinery

fails, or when we collide unexpectedly with something (or something with us). Even in

the case of mere mechanical failure (to say nothing of a serious accident) such intrusion is

always felt, at least initially, as anxiety-provoking. That's a consequence of emergent

uncertainty.

A car, as we perceive it, is not a thing, or an object. It is instead something that takes us

somewhere we want to go. It is only when it stops taking us and going, in fact, that we

perceive it much at all. It is only when a car quits, suddenly—or is involved in an accident

and must be pulled over to the side of the road—that we are forced to apprehend and

analyze the myriad of parts that "car as thing that goes" depends on. When our car fails,

our incompetence with regards to its complexity is instantly revealed. That has practical

consequences (we don't get to go to where we were going), as well as psychological: our

peace of mind disappears along with our functioning vehicle. We must generally turn to

the experts who inhabit garages and workshops to restore both functionality to our

vehicle and simplicity to our perceptions. That's mechanic-as-psychologist.

It is precisely then that we can understand, although we seldom deeply consider, the

staggeringly low-resolution quality of our vision and the inadequacy of our corresponding

understanding. In a crisis, when our thing no longer goes, we turn to those whose

expertise far transcends ours to restore the match between our expectant desire and what

actually happens. This all means that the failure of our car can also force us to confront

the uncertainty of the broader social context, which is usually invisible to us, in which the

machine (and mechanic) are mere parts. Betrayed by our car, we come up against all the

things we don't know. Is it time for a new vehicle? Did I err in my original purchase? Is

the mechanic competent, honest and reliable? Is the garage he works for trustworthy?

Sometimes, too, we must contemplate something worse, something broader and deeper:

Have the roads now become too dangerous? Have I become (or always been) too

incompetent? Too scattered and inattentive? Too old? The limitations of all our

perceptions of things and selves manifest themselves when something we can usually

depend on in our simplified world breaks down. Then the more complex world that was

always there, invisible and conveniently ignored, makes its presence known. It is then

that the walled garden we archetypally inhabit reveals its hidden but ever-present snakes.

You and I Are Simple Only When the World Behaves

When things break down, what has been ignored rushes in. When things are no longer

specified, with precision, the walls crumble, and chaos makes its presence known. When

we've been careless, and let things slide, what we have refused to attend to gathers itself

up, adopts a serpentine form, and strikes—often at the worst possible moment. It is then

that we see what focused intent, precision of aim and careful attention protects us from.

Imagine a loyal and honest wife suddenly confronted by evidence of her husband's

infidelity. She has lived alongside him for years. She saw him as she assumes he is:

reliable, hard-working, loving, dependable. In her marriage, she is standing on a rock, or

so she believes. But he becomes less attentive and more distracted. He begins, in the

clichéd manner, to work longer hours. Small things she says and does irritate him

unjustifiably. One day she sees him in a downtown café with another woman, interacting

with her in a manner difficult to rationalize and ignore. The limitations and inaccuracy of

her former perceptions become immediately and painfully obvious.

Her theory of her husband collapses. What happens, in consequence? First, something

—someone—emerges in his stead: a complex, frightening stranger. That's bad enough.

But it's only half the problem. Her theory of herself collapses, too, in the aftermath of the

betrayal, so that it's not one stranger that's the problem: it's two. Her husband is not who

she perceived him to be—but neither is she, the betrayed wife. She is no longer the "well-

loved, secure wife, and valued partner." Strangely enough, despite our belief in the

permanent immutability of the past, she may never have been.

The past is not necessarily what it was, even though it has already been. The present is

chaotic and indeterminate. The ground shifts continually around her feet, and ours.

Equally, the future, not yet here, changes into something it was not supposed to be. Is the

once reasonably content wife now a "deceived innocent"—or a "gullible fool"? Should she

view herself as victim, or as co-conspirator in a shared delusion? Her husband is—what?

An unsatisfied lover? A target of seduction? A psychopathic liar? The very Devil himself?

How could he be so cruel? How could anyone? What is this home she has been living in?

How could she be so naïve? How could anyone? She looks in the mirror. *Who is she?*

What's going on? Are any of her relationships real? Have any of them ever been? What has

happened to the future? Everything is up for grabs, when the deeper realities of the world

unexpectedly manifest themselves.

Everything is intricate beyond imagining. Everything is affected by everything else. We

perceive a very narrow slice of a causally interconnected matrix, although we strive with

all our might to avoid being confronted by knowledge of that narrowness. The thin veneer

of perceptual sufficiency cracks, however, when something fundamental goes wrong. The

dreadful inadequacy of our senses reveals itself. Everything we hold dear crumbles to

dust. We freeze. We turn to stone. What then do we see? Where can we look, when it is

precisely what we see that has been insufficient?

What Do We See When We Don't Know What We're Looking At?

What is it, that is the world, after the Twin Towers disintegrate? What, if anything, is left

standing? What dread beast rises from the ruins when the invisible pillars supporting the

world's financial system tremble and fall? What do we see when we are swept up in the

fire and drama of a National Socialist rally, or cower, paralyzed with fear, in the midst of a

massacre in Rwanda? What is it that we see, when we cannot understand what is

happening to us, cannot determine where we are, know no longer who we are, and no

longer understand what surrounds us? What we *don't* see is the well-known and

comforting world of tools—of useful objects—of personalities. We don't even see familiar

obstacles—sufficiently troubling though they are in normal times, already mastered—that

we can simply step around.

What we perceive, when things fall apart, is no longer the stage and settings of

habitable order. It's the eternal watery *tohu va bohu*, formless emptiness, and the *tehom*,

the abyss, to speak biblically—the chaos forever lurking beneath our thin surfaces of

security. It's from that chaos that the Holy Word of God Himself extracted order at the

beginning of time, according to the oldest opinions expressed by mankind (and it is in the

image of that same Word that we were made, male and female, according to the same

opinions). It's from that chaos that whatever stability we had the good fortune to

experience emerged, originally—for some limited time—when we first learned to

perceive. It's chaos that we see, when things fall apart (even though we cannot truly see

it). What does all this mean?

Emergency—emergence(y). This is the sudden manifestation from somewhere

unknown of some previously unknown phenomenon (from the Greek *phainesthai*, to

"shine forth"). This is the reappearance of the eternal dragon, from its eternal cavern,

from its now-disrupted slumber. This is the underworld, with its monsters rising from

the depths. How do we prepare for an emergency, when we do not know what has

emerged, or from where? How do we prepare for catastrophe, when we do not know what

to expect, or how to act? We turn from our minds, so to speak—too slow, too ponderous

—to our bodies. Our bodies react much faster than our minds.

When things collapse around us our perception disappears, and we act. Ancient

reflexive responses, rendered automatic and efficient over hundreds of millions of years,

protect us in those dire moments when not only thought but perception itself fails. Under

such circumstances, our bodies ready themselves for all possible eventualities.163 First,

we freeze. The reflexes of the body then shade into emotion, the next stage of perception.

Is this something scary? Something useful? Something that must be fought? Something

that can be ignored? How will we determine this—and when? We don't know. Now we

are in a costly and demanding state of readiness. Our bodies are flooded with cortisol and

adrenaline. Our hearts beat faster. Our breath quickens. We realize, painfully, that our

sense of competence and completeness is gone; it was just a dream. We draw on physical

and psychological resources saved carefully for just this moment (if we are fortunate

enough to have them). We prepare for the worst—or the best. We push the gas pedal

furiously to the floor, and slam on the brakes at the same time. We scream, or laugh. We

look disgusted, or terrified. We cry. And then we begin to parse apart the chaos.

And so, the deceived wife, increasingly unhinged, feels the motivation to reveal all—to

herself, her sister, her best friend, to a stranger on a bus—or retreats into silence, and

ruminates obsessively, to the same end. *What went wrong? What did she do that was so*

unforgivable? Who is this person she has been living with? What kind of world is this, where such

things can happen? What kind of God would make such a place? What conversation could she

possibly initiate with this new, infuriating person, inhabiting the shell of her former

husband? What forms of revenge might satisfy her anger? Who could she seduce, in

return for this insult? She is by turns enraged, terrified, struck down by pain, and

exhilarated by the possibilities of her new-found freedom.

Her last place of bedrock security was in fact not stable, not certain—not bedrock at all.

Her house was built on a foundation of sand. The ice she was skating on was simply too

thin. She fell through, into the water below, and is drowning. She has been hit so hard

that her anger, terror and grief consume her. Her sense of betrayal widens, until the

whole world caves in. Where is she? *In the underworld, with all its terrors*. How did she get

there? This experience, this voyage into the substructure of things—this is all perception,

too, in its nascent form; this preparation; this consideration of what-might-have-been and

what-could-still-be; this emotion and fantasy. This is all the deep perception now

necessary before the familiar objects that she once knew reappear, if they ever do, in their

simplified and comfortable form. This is perception before the chaos of possibility is re-

articulated into the functional realities of order.

“Was it really so unexpected?” she asks herself—she asks others—thinking back.

Should she now feel guilty about ignoring the warning signs, subtle though they may have

been, encouraged though she was to avoid them? She remembers when she first married,

eagerly joining her husband, every single night, to make love. Perhaps that was too much

to expect—or even too much to cope with—but once, in the last six months? Once every

two or three months, for years, before that? Would anyone she could truly respect—

including herself—put up with such a situation?

186

There is a story for children, *There's No Such Thing as a Dragon*, by Jack Kent, that I really

like. It's a very simple tale, at least on the surface. I once read its few pages to a group of

retired University of Toronto alumni, and explained its symbolic meaning. **fn2** It's about a

small boy, Billy Bixbee, who spies a dragon sitting on his bed one morning. It's about the

size of a house cat, and friendly. He tells his mother about it, but she tells him that

there's no such thing as a dragon. So, it starts to grow. It eats all of Billy's pancakes. Soon

it fills the whole house. Mom tries to vacuum, but she has to go in and out of the house

through the windows because of the dragon everywhere. It takes her forever. Then, the

dragon runs off with the house. Billy's dad comes home—and there's just an empty space,

where he used to live. The mailman tells him where the house went. He chases after it,

climbs up the dragon's head and neck (now sprawling out into the street) and rejoins his

wife and son. Mom still insists that the dragon does not exist, but Billy, who's pretty

much had it by now, insists, "There is a dragon, Mom." Instantly, it starts to shrink.

Soon, it's cat-sized again. Everyone agrees that dragons of that size (1) exist and (2) are

much preferable to their gigantic counterparts. Mom, eyes reluctantly opened by this

point, asks somewhat plaintively why it had to get so big. Billy quietly suggests: "maybe it

wanted to be noticed."

Maybe! That's the moral of many, many stories. Chaos emerges in a household, bit by

bit. Mutual unhappiness and resentment pile up. Everything untidy is swept under the

rug, where the dragon feasts on the crumbs. But no one says anything, as the shared

society and negotiated order of the household reveals itself as inadequate, or

disintegrates, in the face of the unexpected and threatening. Everybody whistles in the

dark, instead. Communication would require admission of terrible emotions: resentment,

terror, loneliness, despair, jealousy, frustration, hatred, boredom. Moment by moment,

it’s easier to keep the peace. But in the background, in Billy Bixbee’s house, and in all that

are like it, the dragon grows. One day it bursts forth, in a form that no one can ignore. It

lifts the very household from its foundations. Then it’s an affair, or a decades-long

custody dispute of ruinous economic and psychological proportions. Then it’s the

concentrated version of the acrimony that could have been spread out, tolerably, issue by

issue, over the years of the pseudo-paradise of the marriage. Every one of the three

hundred thousand unrevealed issues, which have been lied about, avoided, rationalized

away, hidden like an army of skeletons in some great horrific closet, bursts forth like

Noah’s flood, drowning everything. There’s no ark, because no one built one, even though

everyone felt the storm gathering.

Don’t ever underestimate the destructive power of sins of omission.

Maybe the demolished couple could have had a conversation, or two, or two hundred,

about their sex lives. Maybe the physical intimacy they undoubtedly shared should have

been matched, as it often is not, *by a corresponding psychological intimacy*. Maybe they could

have fought through their roles. In many households, in recent decades, the traditional

household division of labour has been demolished, not least in the name of liberation and

freedom. That demolition, however, has not left so much glorious lack of restriction in its

wake as chaos, conflict and indeterminacy. The escape from tyranny is often followed not

by Paradise, but by a sojourn in the desert, aimless, confused and deprived. Furthermore,

in the absence of agreed-upon tradition (and the constraints—often uncomfortable; often

even unreasonable—that it imposes) there exist only three difficult options: slavery,

tyranny or negotiation. The slave merely does what he or she is told—happy, perhaps, to

shed the responsibility—and solves the problem of complexity in that manner. But it's a

temporary solution. The spirit of the slave rebels. The tyrant merely tells the slave what

to do, and solves the problem of complexity in that manner. But it's a temporary solution.

The tyrant tires of the slave. There's nothing and no one there, except for predictable and

sullen obedience. Who can live forever with that? But negotiation—that requires

forthright admission on the part of both players that the dragon exists. That's a reality

difficult to face, even when it's still too small to simply devour the knight who dares

confront it.

Maybe the demolished couple could have more precisely specified their desired manner

of Being. Maybe in that manner they could have jointly prevented the waters of chaos

from springing uncontrollably forth and drowning them. Maybe they could have done that

instead of saying, in the agreeable, lazy and cowardly way: "It's OK. It's not worth

fighting about." There is little, in a marriage, that is so little that it is not worth fighting

about. You're stuck in a marriage like the two proverbial cats in a barrel, bound by the

oath that lasts in theory until one or both of you die. That oath is there to make you take

the damn situation seriously. Do you really want the same petty annoyance tormenting

you every single day of your marriage, for the decades of its existence?

"Oh, I can put up with it," you think. And maybe you should. You're no paragon of

genuine tolerance. And maybe if you brought up how your partner's giddy laugh is

beginning to sound like nails on a blackboard he (or she) would tell you, quite properly,

to go to hell. And maybe the fault is with you, and you should grow up, get yourself

together and keep quiet. But perhaps braying like a donkey in the midst of a social

gathering is not reflecting well on your partner, and you should stick to your guns. Under

such circumstances, there is nothing but a fight—a fight with peace as the goal—that will

reveal the truth. But you remain silent, and you convince yourself it's because you are a

good, peace-loving, patient person (and nothing could be further from the truth). And the

monster under the rug gains a few more pounds.

Maybe a forthright conversation about sexual dissatisfaction might have been the

proverbial stitch in time—not that it would be easy. Perhaps *madame* desired the death of

intimacy, clandestinely, because she was deeply and secretly ambivalent about sex. God

knows there's reason to be. Perhaps *monsieur* was a terrible, selfish lover. Maybe they both

were. Sorting that out is worth a fight, isn't it? That's a big part of life, isn't it? Perhaps

addressing that and (you never know) solving the problem would be worth two months

of pure misery just telling each other the truth (not with intent to destroy, or attain

victory, because that's not the truth: that's just all-out war).

Maybe it wasn't sex. Maybe every conversation between husband and wife had

deteriorated into boring routine, as no shared adventure animated the couple. Maybe that

deterioration was easier, moment by moment, day by day, than bearing the responsibility

of keeping the relationship alive. Living things die, after all, without attention. Life is

indistinguishable from effortful maintenance. No one finds a match so perfect that the

need for continued attention and work vanishes (and, besides, if you found the perfect

person, he or she would run away from ever-so-imperfect you in justifiable horror). In

truth, what you need—what you deserve, after all—is someone exactly as imperfect as

you.

Maybe the husband who betrayed his wife was appallingly immature and selfish. Maybe

that selfishness got the upper hand. Maybe she did not oppose this tendency with enough

force and vigour. Maybe she could not agree with him on the proper disciplinary approach

to the children, and shut him out of their lives, in consequence. Maybe that allowed him

to circumvent what he saw as an unpleasant responsibility. Maybe hatred brewed in the

hearts of the children, watching this underground battle, punished by the resentment of

their mother and alienated, bit by bit, from good old Dad. Maybe the dinners she

prepared for him—or he for her—were cold and bitterly eaten. Maybe all that

unaddressed conflict left both resentful, in a manner unspoken, but effectively enacted.

Maybe all that unspoken trouble started to undermine the invisible networks that

supported the marriage. Maybe respect slowly turned into contempt, and no one deigned

to notice. Maybe love slowly turned into hate, without mention.

188

Everything clarified and articulated becomes visible; maybe neither wife nor husband

wished to see or understand. Maybe they left things purposefully in the fog. Maybe they

generated the fog, to hide what they did not want to see. What did missus gain, when she

turned from mistress to maid or mother? Was it a relief when her sex life disappeared?

Could she complain more profitably to the neighbours and her mother when her husband

turned away? Maybe that was more gratifying, secretly, than anything good that could be

derived from any marriage, no matter how perfect. What can possibly compare to the

pleasures of sophisticated and well-practised martyrdom? “She’s such a saint, and

married to such a terrible man. She deserved much better.” That’s a gratifying myth to

live by, even if unconsciously chosen (the truth of the situation be damned). Maybe she

never really liked her husband. Maybe she never really liked men, and still doesn’t. Maybe

that was her mother’s fault—or her grandmother’s. Maybe she mimicked their behaviour,

acting out their trouble, transmitted unconsciously, implicitly, down the generations.

Maybe she was taking revenge on her father, or her brother, or society.

What did her husband gain, for his part, when his sex life at home died? Did he

willingly play along, as martyr, and complain bitterly to his friends? Did he use it as the

excuse he wanted anyway to search for a new lover? Did he use it to justify the

resentment he still felt towards women, in general, for the rejections he had faced so

continuously before falling into his marriage? Did he seize the opportunity to get

effortlessly fat and lazy because he wasn't desired, in any case?

Maybe both, wife and husband alike, used the opportunity to mess up their marriage to

take revenge upon God (perhaps the one Being who could have sorted through the mess).

Here's the terrible truth about such matters: every single voluntarily unprocessed and

uncomprehended and ignored reason for marital failure will compound and conspire and

will then plague that betrayed and self-betrayed woman for the rest of her life. The same

goes for her husband. All she—he—they—or we—must do to ensure such an outcome *is*

nothing: *don't notice, don't react, don't attend, don't discuss, don't consider, don't work for peace,*

don't take responsibility. Don't confront the chaos and turn it into order—just wait,

anything but naïve and innocent, for the chaos to rise up and engulf you instead.

Why avoid, when avoidance necessarily and inevitably poisons the future? Because the

possibility of a monster lurks underneath all disagreements and errors. Maybe the fight

you are having (or not having) with your wife or your husband signifies the beginning of

the end of your relationship. Maybe your relationship is ending *because you are a bad person*.

It's likely, at least in part. Isn't it? Having the argument necessary to solve a real problem

therefore necessitates willingness to confront two forms of miserable and dangerous

potential simultaneously: chaos (the potential fragility of the relationship—of all

relationships—of life itself) and Hell (the fact that you—and your partner—could each be

the person bad enough to ruin everything with your laziness and spite). There's every

motivation to avoid. But it doesn't help.

Why remain vague, when it renders life stagnant and murky? Well, if you don't know

who you are, you can hide in doubt. Maybe you're *not* a bad, careless, worthless person.

Who knows? Not you. Particularly if you refuse to think about it—and you have every

reason not to. But not thinking about something you don't want to know about doesn't

make it go away. You are merely trading specific, particular, pointed knowledge of the

likely finite list of your real faults and flaws for a much longer list of undefined potential

inadequacies and insufficiencies.

Why refuse to investigate, when knowledge of reality enables mastery of reality (and if

not mastery, at least the stature of an honest amateur)? Well, what if there truly is

something rotten in the state of Denmark? Then what? Isn't it better under such

conditions to live in willful blindness and enjoy the bliss of ignorance? Well, not if the

monster is real! Do you truly think it is a good idea to retreat, to abandon the possibility

of arming yourself against the rising sea of troubles, and to thereby diminish yourself in

your own eyes? Do you truly think it wise to let the catastrophe grow in the shadows,

while you shrink and decrease and become ever more afraid? Isn't it better to prepare, to

sharpen your sword, to peer into the darkness, and then to beard the lion in its den?

Maybe you'll get hurt. *Probably* you'll get hurt. Life, after all, is suffering. But maybe the

wound won't be fatal.

If you wait instead until what you are refusing to investigate comes a-knocking at your

door, things will certainly not go so well for you. What you least want will inevitably

happen—and when you are least prepared. What you least want to encounter will make

itself manifest when you are weakest and it is strongest. And you will be defeated.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity. 164

(William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming")

Why refuse to specify, when specifying the problem would enable its solution? Because to

specify the problem is to admit that it exists. Because to specify the problem is to allow

yourself to know what you want, say, from friend or lover—and then you will know,

precisely and cleanly, when you don't get it, and that will hurt, sharply and specifically.

But you will learn something from that, and use what you learn in the future —and the

alternative to that single sharp pain is the dull ache of continued hopelessness and vague

failure and the sense that time, precious time, is slipping by.

Why refuse to specify? Because while you are failing to define success (and thereby

rendering it impossible) you are also refusing to define failure, to yourself, so that if and

when you fail you won't notice, and it won't hurt. But that won't work! You cannot be

fooled so easily—unless you have gone very far down the road! You will instead carry

with you a continual sense of disappointment in your own Being and the self-contempt

that comes along with that and the increasing hatred for the world that all of that

generates (or degenerates).

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

What if she who has been betrayed, now driven by desperation, is now determined to face

all the incoherence of past, present and future? What if she decided to sort through the

mess, even though she has avoided doing so until now, and is all the weaker and more

confused for it? Perhaps the effort will nearly kill her (but she is now on a path worse

than death in any case). To re-emerge, to escape, to be reborn, she must thoughtfully

articulate the reality she comfortably but dangerously left hidden behind a veil of

ignorance and the pretence of peace. She must separate the particular details of her

specific catastrophe from the intolerable general condition of Being, in a world where

everything has fallen apart. Everything—that's far too much. It was *specific* things that fell

apart, not everything; *identifiable beliefs* failed; *particular actions* were false and inauthentic.

What were they? How can they be fixed, now? How can she be better, in the future? She

will never return to dry land if she refuses or is unable to figure it all out. She can put the

world back together by some precision of thought, some precision of speech, some

reliance on her word, some reliance on the Word. But perhaps it's better to leave things

in the fog. Perhaps by now there just isn't enough left of her—perhaps too much of her

has been left unrevealed, undeveloped. Maybe she simply no longer has the energy.…

Some earlier care and courage and honesty in expression might have saved her from all

this trouble. What if she had communicated her unhappiness with the decline of her

romantic life, right when it started to decline? Precisely, exactly, when that decline first

bothered her? Or, if it didn't bother her—what if she had instead communicated the fact

it didn't bother her as much as it perhaps should have? What if she had clearly and

carefully confronted the fact of our husband's contempt for her household efforts? Would

she have discovered her resentment of her father and society itself (and the consequent

contamination of her relationships)? What if she had fixed all that? How much stronger

would she then have become? How much less likely to avoid facing up to difficulties, in

consequence? How might she then have served herself, her family, and the world?

What if she had continually and honestly risked conflict in the present, in the service of

longer-term truth and peace? What if she had treated the micro-collapses of her marriage

as evidence of an underlying instability, eminently worthy of attention, instead of

ignoring them, putting up with them, or smiling through them, in such a nice, agreeable

manner? Maybe she would be different, and her husband, different too. Maybe they would

still be married, formally and in spirit. Maybe they would both be much younger,

physically and mentally, than they are now. Maybe her house would have been founded

more on rock and less on sand.

When things fall apart, and chaos re-emerges, we can give structure to it, and re-

establish order, through our speech. If we speak carefully and precisely, we can sort

things out, and put them in their proper place, and set a new goal, and navigate to it—

often communally, if we negotiate; if we reach consensus. If we speak carelessly and

imprecisely, however, things remain vague. The destination remains unproclaimed. The

fog of uncertainty does not lift, and there is no negotiating through the world.

The Construction of Soul and World

The psyche (the soul) and the world are both organized, at the highest levels of human

existence, with language, through communication. Things are not as they appear when

the outcome has been neither intended nor desired. Being has not been sorted into its

proper categories, when it is not behaving. When something goes wrong, even perception

itself must be questioned, along with evaluation, thought and action. When error

announces itself, undifferentiated chaos is at hand. Its reptilian form paralyzes and

confuses. But dragons, which do exist (perhaps more than anything else exists) also

hoard gold. In that collapse into the terrible mess of uncomprehended Being lurks the

possibility of new and benevolent order. Clarity of thought—courageous clarity of thought

—is necessary to call it forth.

The problem itself must be admitted to, as close to the time of its emergence as

possible. “I’m unhappy,” is a good start (not “I have a right to be unhappy,” because that

is still questionable, at the beginning of the problem-solving process). Perhaps your

unhappiness is justified, under the current circumstances. Perhaps any reasonable person

would be displeased and miserable to be where you are. Alternatively, perhaps, you are

just whiny and immature? Consider both at least equally probable, as terrible as such

consideration might appear. Just exactly how immature might you be? There's a

potentially bottomless pit. But at least you might rectify it, if you can admit to it.

We parse the complex, tangled chaos, and specify the nature of things, including

ourselves. It is in this way that our creative, communicative exploration continually

generates and regenerates the world. We are shaped and informed by what we voluntarily

encounter, and we shape what we inhabit, as well, in that encounter. This is difficult, but

the difficulty is not relevant, because the alternative is worse.

Maybe our errant husband ignored the dinner conversation of his wife because he hated

his job and was tired and resentful. Maybe he hated his job because his career was forced

on him by his father and he was too weak or "loyal" to object. Maybe she put up with his

lack of attention because she believed that forthright objection itself was rude and

immoral. Maybe she hated her own father's anger and decided, when very young, that all

aggression and assertiveness were morally wrong. Maybe she thought her husband

wouldn't love her if she had any opinions of her own. It is very difficult to put such things

in order—but damaged machinery will continue to malfunction if its problems are neither

diagnosed nor fixed.

Wheat from Chaff

Precision specifies. When something terrible happens, it is precision that separates the

unique terrible thing that has actually happened from all the other, equally terrible things

that might have happened—but did not. If you wake up in pain, you might be dying. You

might be dying slowly and terribly from one of a diverse number of painful, horrible

diseases. If you refuse to tell your doctor about your pain, then what you have is

unspecified: it could be *any* of those diseases—and it certainly (since you have avoided the

diagnostic conversation—the act of articulation) is something unspeakable. But if you talk

to your doctor, all those terrible possible diseases will collapse, with luck, into just one

terrible (or not so terrible) disease, or even into nothing. Then you can laugh at your

previous fears, and if something really is wrong, well, you're prepared. Precision may

leave the tragedy intact, but it chases away the ghouls and the demons.

What you hear in the forest but cannot see might be a tiger. It might even be a

conspiracy of tigers, each hungrier and more vicious than the other, led by a crocodile.

But it might not be, too. If you turn and look, perhaps you'll see that it's just a squirrel. (I

know someone who was actually chased by a squirrel.) Something is out there in the

woods. You know that with certainty. But often it's only a squirrel. If you refuse to look,

however, then it's a dragon, and you're no knight: you're a mouse confronting a lion; a

rabbit, paralyzed by the gaze of a wolf. And I am not saying that it's always a squirrel.

Often it's something truly terrible. But even what is terrible in actuality often pales in

significance compared to what is terrible in imagination. And often what cannot be

confronted because of its horror in imagination can in fact be confronted when reduced to

its-still-admittedly-terrible actuality.

If you shirk the responsibility of confronting the unexpected, even when it appears in

manageable doses, reality itself will become unsustainably disorganized and chaotic. Then

it will grow bigger and swallow all order, all sense, and all predictability. Ignored reality

transforms itself (reverts back) into the great Goddess of Chaos, the great reptilian

Monster of the Unknown—the great predatory beast against which mankind has

struggled since the dawn of time. If the gap between pretence and reality goes

unmentioned, it will widen, you will fall into it, and the consequences will not be good.

Ignored reality manifests itself in an abyss of confusion and suffering.

Be careful with what you tell yourself and others about what you have done, what you

are doing, and where you are going. Search for the correct words. Organize those words

into the correct sentences, and those sentences into the correct paragraphs. The past can

be redeemed, when reduced by precise language to its essence. The present can flow by

without robbing the future if its realities are spoken out clearly. With careful thought and

language, the singular, stellar destiny that justifies existence can be extracted from the

multitude of murky and unpleasant futures that are far more likely to manifest

themselves of their own accord. This is how the Eye and the Word make habitable order.

Don’t hide baby monsters under the carpet. They will flourish. They will grow large in

the dark. Then, when you least expect it, they will jump out and devour you. You will

descend into an indeterminate, confusing hell, instead of ascending into the heaven of

virtue and clarity. Courageous and truthful words will render your reality simple, pristine,

well-defined and habitable.

If you identify things, with careful attention and language, you bring them forward as

viable, obedient objects, detaching them from their underlying near-universal

interconnectedness. You simplify them. You make them specific and useful, and reduce

their complexity. You make it possible to live with them and use them without dying

from that complexity, with its attendant uncertainty and anxiety. If you leave things

vague, then you’ll never know what is one thing and what is another. Everything will

bleed into everything else. This makes the world too complex to be managed.

You have to consciously define the topic of a conversation, particularly when it is

difficult—or it becomes about everything, and everything is too much. This is so

frequently why couples cease communicating. Every argument degenerates into every

problem that ever emerged in the past, every problem that exists now, and every terrible

thing that is likely to happen in the future. No one can have a discussion about

"everything." Instead, you can say, "This exact, precise thing—that is what is making me

unhappy. This exact, precise thing—that is what I want, as an alternative (although I am

open to suggestions, if they are specific). This exact, precise thing—that is what you could

deliver, so that I will stop making your life and mine miserable." But to do that, you have

to *think*: What is wrong, *exactly*? What do I want, *exactly*? You must speak forthrightly and

call forth the habitable world from chaos. You must use honest precise speech to do that.

If instead you shrink away and hide, what you are hiding from will transform itself into

the giant dragon that lurks under your bed and in your forest and in the dark recesses of

your mind—and it will devour you.

You must determine where you have been in your life, so that you can know where you

are now. If you don't know where you are, precisely, then you could be anywhere.

Anywhere is too many places to be, and some of those places are very bad. You must

determine where you have been in your life, because otherwise you can't get to where

you're going. You can't get from point A to point B unless you are already at point A, and

if you're just "anywhere" the chances you are at point A are very small indeed.

You must determine where you are going in your life, because you cannot get there

unless you move in that direction. Random wandering will not move you forward. It will

instead disappoint and frustrate you and make you anxious and unhappy and hard to get

along with (and then resentful, and then vengeful, and then worse).

Say what you mean, so that you can find out what you mean. Act out what you say, so

you can find out what happens. Then pay attention. Note your errors. Articulate them.

Strive to correct them. That is how you discover the meaning of your life. That will

protect you from the tragedy of your life. How could it be otherwise?

Confront the chaos of Being. Take aim against a sea of troubles. Specify your

destination, and chart your course. Admit to what you want. Tell those around you who

you are. Narrow, and gaze attentively, and move forward, forthrightly.

Be precise in your speech.

195

R U L E 1 1

DO NOT BOTHER CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE

SKATEBOARDING

DANGER AND MASTERY

There was a time when kids skateboarded on the west side of Sidney Smith Hall, at the

University of Toronto, where I work. Sometimes I stood there and watched them. There

are rough, wide, shallow concrete steps there, leading up from the street to the front

entrance, accompanied by tubular iron handrails, about two and a half inches in diameter

and twenty feet long. The crazy kids, almost always boys, would pull back about fifteen

yards from the top of the steps. Then they would place a foot on their boards, and skate

like mad to get up some speed. Just before they collided with the handrail, they would

reach down, grab their board with a single hand and jump onto the top of the rail,

boardsliding their way down its length, propelling themselves off and landing—

sometimes, gracefully, still atop their boards, sometimes, painfully, off them. Either way,

they were soon back at it.

Some might call that stupid. Maybe it was. But it was brave, too. I thought those kids

were amazing. I thought they deserved a pat on the back and some honest admiration. Of

course it was dangerous. Danger was the point. They wanted to triumph over danger.

They would have been safer in protective equipment, but that would have ruined it. They

weren't trying to be safe. They were trying to become competent—and it's competence

that makes people as safe as they can truly be.

I wouldn't dare do what those kids were doing. Not only that, I couldn't. I certainly

couldn't climb a construction crane, like a certain type of modern daredevil, evident on

YouTube (and, of course, people who work on construction cranes). I don't like heights,

although the twenty-five thousand feet to which airliners ascend is so high that it doesn't

bother me. I have flown several times in a carbon fibre stunt plane—even doing a

hammerhead roll—and that was OK, although it's very physically and mentally

demanding. (To perform a hammerhead roll, you pilot the plane straight up vertically,

until the force of gravity makes it stall. Then it falls backwards, corkscrewing, until

eventually it flips and noses straight down, after which you pull out of the dive. Or you

don't do another hammerhead roll.) But I can't skateboard—especially down handrails—

and I can't climb cranes.

Sidney Smith Hall faces another street on the east side. Along that street, named St.

George—ironically enough—the university installed a series of rough, hard-edged,

concrete plant boxes, sloping down to the roadway. The kids used to go out there, too,

and boardslide along the box edges, as they did along the concrete surround of a sculpture

adjacent to the building. That didn't last very long. Little steel brackets known as

"skatestoppers" soon appeared, every two or three feet, along those edges. When I first

saw them, I remembered something that happened in Toronto several years previously.

Two weeks before elementary school classes started, throughout the city, all the

playground equipment disappeared. The legislation governing such things had changed,

and there was a panic about insurability. The playgrounds were hastily removed, even

though they were sufficiently safe, grandfathered re their insurability, and often paid for

(and quite recently) by parents. This meant no playgrounds at all for more than a year.

During this time, I often saw bored but admirable kids charging around on the roof of our

local school. It was that or scrounge about in the dirt with the cats and the less

adventurous children.

I say “sufficiently safe” about the demolished playgrounds because when playgrounds

are made too safe, kids either stop playing in them or start playing in unintended ways.

Kids need playgrounds dangerous enough to remain challenging. People, including

children (who are people too, after all) don’t seek to minimize risk. They seek to optimize

it. They drive and walk and love and play so that they achieve what they desire, but they

push themselves a bit at the same time, too, so they continue to develop. Thus, if things

are made too safe, people (including children) start to figure out ways to make them

dangerous again. 165

When untrammeled—and encouraged—we prefer to live on the edge. There, we can

still be both confident in our experience and confronting the chaos that helps us develop.

We're hard-wired, for that reason, to enjoy risk (some of us more than others). We feel

invigorated and excited when we work to optimize our future performance, while playing

in the present. Otherwise we lumber around, sloth-like, unconscious, unformed and

careless. Overprotected, we will fail when something dangerous, unexpected and full of

opportunity suddenly makes its appearance, as it inevitably will.

The skatestoppers are unattractive. The surround of the nearby sculpture would have to

have been badly damaged by diligent boardsliders before it would look as mean as it does

now, studded with metal like a pit bull's collar. The large plant boxes have metal guards

placed at irregular intervals across their tops, and this, in addition to the wear caused by

the skateboarders, produces a dismal impression of poor design, resentment and badly

executed afterthoughts. It gives the area, which was supposed to be beautified by the

sculpture and vegetation, a generic industrial/prison/mental institution/work-camp look

of the kind that appears when builders and public officials do not like or trust the people

they serve.

The sheer harsh ugliness of the solution makes a lie of the reasons for its

implementation.

Success and Resentment

If you read the depth psychologists—Freud and Jung, for example, as well as their

precursor, Friedrich Nietzsche—you learn that there is a dark side to everything. Freud

delved deeply into the latent, implicit content of dreams, which were often aimed, in his

opinion, at the expression of some improper wish. Jung believed that every act of social

propriety was accompanied by its evil twin, its unconscious shadow. Nietzsche

investigated the role played by what he termed *ressentiment* in motivating what were

ostensibly selfless actions—and, often, exhibited all too publicly. 166

For that man be delivered from revenge—that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long

storms. The tarantulas, of course, would have it otherwise. “What justice means to us is precisely that the world

be filled with the storms of our revenge”—thus they speak to each other. “We shall wreak vengeange and abuse

on all whose equals we are not”—thus do the tarantula-hearts vow. “And ‘will to equality’ shall henceforth be

the name for virtue; and against all that has power we want to raise our clamor!” You preachers of equality, the

tyrant-mania of impotence clamors thus out of you for equality: your most secret ambitions to be tyrants thus

shroud themselves in words of virtue.

The incomparable English essayist George Orwell knew this sort of thing well. In 1937,

he wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which was in part a scathing attack on upper-class British

socialists (this, despite being inclined towards socialism himself). In the first half of this

book, Orwell portrays the appalling conditions faced by UK miners in the 1930s:167

Several dentists have told me that in industrial districts a person over thirty with any of his or her own teeth is

coming to be an abnormality. In Wigan various people gave me their opinion that it is best to get shut of your

teeth as early in life as possible. ‘Teeth is just a misery,’ one woman said to me .

197

A Wigan Pier coal miner had to walk—crawl would be a better word, given the height of

the mine shafts—up to three miles, underground, in the dark, banging his head and

scraping his back, just to get to his seven-and-a-half-hour shift of backbreaking work.

After that, he crawled back. “It is comparable, perhaps, to climbing a smallish mountain

before and after your day’s work,” stated Orwell. None of the time spent crawling was

paid.

Orwell wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier* for the Left Book Club, a socialist publishing group

that released a select volume every month. After reading the first half of his book, which

deals directly with the miners’ personal circumstances, it is impossible not to feel

sympathy for the working poor. Only a monster could keep his heart hardened through

the accounts of the lives Orwell describes:

It is not long since conditions in the mines were worse than they are now. There are still living a few very old

women who in their youth have worked underground, crawling on all fours and dragging tubs of coal. They

used to go on doing this even when they were pregnant.

In book’s second half, however, Orwell turned his gaze to a different problem: the

comparative unpopularity of socialism in the UK at the time, despite the clear and painful

inequity observable everywhere. He concluded that the tweed-wearing, armchair-

philosophizing, victim-identifying, pity-and-contempt-dispensing social-reformer types

frequently did not like the poor, as they claimed. *Instead, they just hated the rich*. They

disguised their resentment and jealousy with piety, sanctimony and self-righteousness.

Things in the unconscious—or on the social justice–dispensing leftist front—haven't

changed much, today. It is because of of Freud, Jung, Nietzsche—and Orwell—that I

always wonder, "What, then, do you stand against?" whenever I hear someone say, too

loudly, "I stand for this!" The question seems particularly relevant if the same someone is

complaining, criticizing, or trying to change someone else's behaviour.

I believe it was Jung who developed the most surgically wicked of psychoanalytic dicta:

if you cannot understand why someone did something, look at the consequences—and infer the

motivation. This is a psychological scalpel. It's not always a suitable instrument. It can cut

too deeply, or in the wrong places. It is, perhaps, a last-resort option. Nonetheless, there

are times when its application proves enlightening.

If the consequences of placing skatestoppers on plant-boxes and sculpture bases, for

example, is unhappy adolescent males and brutalist aesthetic disregard of beauty then,

perhaps, that was the aim. When someone claims to be acting from the highest principles,

for the good of others, there is no reason to assume that the person's motives are

genuine. People motivated to make things better usually aren't concerned with changing

other people—or, if they are, they take responsibility for making the same changes to

themselves (and first). Beneath the production of rules stopping the skateboarders from

doing highly skilled, courageous and dangerous things I see the operation of an insidious

and profoundly anti-human spirit.

More about Chris

My friend Chris, whom I wrote about earlier, was possessed by such a spirit —to the

serious detriment of his mental health. Part of what plagued him was guilt. He attended

elementary and junior high school in a number of towns, up in the frigid expanses of the

northernmost Alberta prairie, prior to ending up in the Fairview I wrote about earlier.

Fights with Native kids were a too-common part of his experience, during those moves.

It's no overstatement to point out that such kids were, on average, rougher than the white

kids, or that they were touchier (and they had their reasons). I knew this well from my

own experience.

I had a rocky friendship with a Métis kid, Rene Heck, **fn1** when I was in elementary

I had a rocky friendship with a Métis kid, Rene Heck, **fn1** when I was in elementary school. It was rocky because the situation was complex. There was a large cultural divide

between Rene and me. His clothes were dirtier. He was rougher in speech and attitude. I

had skipped a grade in school, and was, in addition, small for my age. Rene was a big,

smart, good-looking kid, and he was tough. We were in grade six together, in a class

taught by my father. Rene was caught chewing gum. "Rene," said my father, "spit that

gum out. You look like a cow." "Ha, ha," I laughed, under my breath. "Rene the cow."

Rene might have been a cow, but there was nothing wrong with his hearing. "Peterson,"

he said, "after school—you're dead."

Earlier in the morning, Rene and I had arranged to see a movie that night at the local

movie theatre, the Gem. It looked like that was off. In any case, the rest of the day passed,

quickly and unpleasantly, as it does when threat and pain lurk. Rene was more than

capable of giving me a good pounding. After school, I took off for the bike stands outside

the school as fast as I could, but Rene beat me there. We circled around the bikes, him on

one side, me on the other. We were characters in a "Keystone Cops" short. As long as I

kept circling, he couldn't catch me, but my strategy couldn't work forever. I yelled out

that I was sorry, but he wasn't mollified. His pride was hurt, and he wanted me to pay.

I crouched down and hid behind some bikes, keeping an eye on Rene. "Rene," I yelled,

"I'm sorry I called you a cow. Let's quit fighting." He started to approach me again. I said,

“Rene, I am sorry I said that. Really. And I still want to go to the movie with you.” This

wasn’t just a tactic. I meant it. Otherwise what happened next would not have happened.

Rene stopped circling. Then he stared at me. Then he broke into tears. Then he ran off.

That was Native-white relationships in a nutshell, in our hard little town. We never did

go to a movie together.

When my friend Chris got into it with Native kids, he wouldn’t fight back. He didn’t

feel that his self-defence was morally justified, so he took his beatings. “We took their

land,” he later wrote. “That was wrong. No wonder they’re angry.” Over time, step by

step, Chris withdrew from the world. It was partly his guilt. He developed a deep hatred

for masculinity and masculine activity. He saw going to school or working or finding a

girlfriend as part of the same process that had led to the colonization of North America,

the horrible nuclear stalemate of the cold war, and the despoiling of the planet. He had

read some books about Buddhism, and felt that negation of his own Being was ethically

required, in the light of the current world situation. He came to believe that the same

applied to others.

When I was an undergraduate, Chris was, for a while, one of my roommates. One late

night we went to a local bar. We walked home, afterward. He started to snap the side-

view mirrors off parked cars, one after the other. I said, “Quit that, Chris. What possible

good is it going to do to make the people who own these cars miserable?” He told me that

they were all part of the frenetic human activity that was ruining everything, and that they

deserved whatever they got. I said that taking revenge on people who were just living

normal lives was not going to help anything.

Years later, when I was in graduate school in Montreal, Chris showed up, for what was

supposed to be a visit. He was aimless, however, and lost. He asked if I could help. He

ended up moving in. I was married by then, living with my wife, Tammy, and our year-old

daughter, Mikhaila. Chris had also been friends with Tammy back in Fairview (and held

out hopes of more than friendship). That complicated the situation even more—but not

precisely in the manner you might think. Chris started by hating men, but he ended by

hating women. He wanted them, but he had rejected education, and career, and desire. He

smoked heavily, and was unemployed. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he was not of much

interest to women. That made him bitter. I tried to convince him that the path he had

chosen was only going to lead to further ruin. He needed to develop some humility. He

needed to get a life.

One evening, it was Chris's turn to make dinner. When my wife came home, the

apartment was filled with smoke. Hamburgers were burning furiously in the frying pan.

Chris was on his hands and knees, attempting to repair something that had come loose

on the legs of the stove. My wife knew his tricks. She knew he was burning dinner on

purpose. He resented having to make it. He resented the feminine role (even though the

household duties were split in a reasonable manner; even though he knew that perfectly

well). He was fixing the stove to provide a plausible, even creditable excuse for burning

the food. When she pointed out what he was doing, he played the victim, but he was

deeply and dangerously furious. Part of him, and not the good part, was convinced that he

was smarter than anyone else. It was a blow to his pride that she could see through his

tricks. It was an ugly situation.

Tammy and I took a walk up towards a local park the next day. We needed to get away

from the apartment, although it was thirty-five below—bitterly, frigidly cold, humid and

foggy. It was windy. It was hostile to life. Living with Chris was too much, Tammy said.

We entered the park. The trees forked their bare branches upward through the damp grey

air. A black squirrel, tail hairless from mange, gripped a leafless branch, shivered

violently, struggling to hold on against the wind. What was it doing out there in the cold?

Squirrels are partial hibernators. They only come out in the winter when it's warm. Then

we saw another, and another, and another, and another, and another. There were

squirrels all around us in the park, all partially hairless, tails and bodies alike, all

windblown on their branches, all shaking and freezing in the deathly cold. No one else

was around. It was impossible. It was inexplicable. It was exactly appropriate. We were on

the stage of an absurdist play. It was directed by God. Tammy left soon after with our

daughter for a few days elsewhere.

Near Christmas time, that same year, my younger brother and his new wife came out to

visit from western Canada. My brother also knew Chris. They all put on their winter

clothes in preparation for a walk around downtown Montreal. Chris put on a long dark

winter coat. He pulled a black toque, a brimless knitted cap, far down over his head. His

coat was black, as were his pants and boots. He was very tall, and thin, and somewhat

stooped. “Chris,” I joked. “You look like a serial killer.” Ha bloody ha. The three came

back from their walk. Chris was out of sorts. There were strangers in his territory.

Another happy couple. It was salt in his wounds.

We had dinner, pleasantly enough. We talked, and ended the evening. But I couldn’t

sleep. Something wasn’t right. It was in the air. At four in the morning, I had had enough.

I crawled out of bed. I knocked quietly on Chris's door and went without waiting for an

answer into his room. He was awake on the bed, staring at the ceiling, as I knew he would

be. I sat down beside him. I knew him very well. I talked him down from his murderous

rage. Then I went back to bed, and slept. The next morning my brother pulled me aside.

He wanted to speak with me. We sat down. He said, "What the hell was going on last

night? I couldn't sleep at all. Was something wrong?" I told my brother that Chris wasn't

doing so well. I didn't tell him that he was lucky to be alive—that we all were. The spirit

of Cain had visited our house, but we were left unscathed.

Maybe I picked up some change in scent that night, when death hung in the air. Chris

had a very bitter odour. He showered frequently, but the towels and the sheets picked up

the smell. It was impossible to get them clean. It was the product of a psyche and a body

that did not operate harmoniously. A social worker I knew, who also knew Chris, told me

of her familiarity with that odour. Everyone at her workplace knew of it, although they

only discussed it in hushed tones. They called it the smell of the unemployable.

Soon after this I finished my post-doctoral studies. Tammy and I moved away from

Soon after this I finished my post-doctoral studies. Tammy and I moved away from

Montreal to Boston. We had our second baby. Now and then, Chris and I talked on the

phone. He came to visit once. It went well. He had found a job at an auto-parts place. He

was trying to make things better. He was OK at that point. But it didn't last. I didn't see

him in Boston again. Almost ten years later—the night before Chris's fortieth birthday, as

it happened—he called me again. By this time, I had moved my family to Toronto. He had

some news. A story he had written was going to be published in a collection put together

by a small but legitimate press. He wanted to tell me that. He wrote good short stories. I

had read them all. We had discussed them at length. He was a good photographer, too.

He had a good, creative eye. The next day, Chris drove his old pickup—the same battered

beast from Fairview—into the bush. He ran a hose from the exhaust pipe into the front

cab. I can see him there, looking through the cracked windshield, smoking, waiting. They

found his body a few weeks later. I called his dad. “My beautiful boy,” he sobbed.

Recently, I was invited to give a TEDx talk at a nearby university. Another professor

talked first. He had been invited to speak because of his work—his genuinely fascinating,

technical work—with computationally intelligent surfaces (like computer touchscreens,

but capable of being placed everywhere). He spoke instead about the threat human beings

posed to the survival of the planet. Like Chris—like far too many people—he had become

anti-human, to the core. He had not walked as far down that road as my friend, but the

same dread spirit animated them both.

He stood in front of a screen displaying an endless slow pan of a blocks-long Chinese

high-tech factory. Hundreds of white-suited workers stood like sterile, inhuman robots

behind their assembly lines, soundlessly inserting piece A into slot B. He told the

audience—filled with bright young people—of the decision he and his wife had made to

limit their number of children to one. He told them it was something they should all

consider, if they wanted to regard themselves as ethical people. I felt that such a decision

was properly considered—but only in his particular case (where less than one might have

been even better). The many Chinese students in attendance sat stolidly through his

moralizing. They thought, perhaps, of their parents' escape from the horrors of Mao's

Cultural Revolution and its one-child policy. They thought, perhaps, of the vast

improvement in living standard and freedom provided by the very same factories. A

couple of them said as much in the question period that followed.

Would have the professor reconsidered his opinions, if he knew where such ideas can

lead? I would like to say yes, but I don't believe it. I think he could have known, but

refused to. Worse, perhaps: he knew, but didn't care—or knew, and was headed there,

voluntarily, in any case.

Self-Appointed Judges of the Human Race

It has not been long since the Earth seemed infinitely larger than the people who

inhabited it. It was only in the late 1800s that the brilliant biologist Thomas Huxley

(1825-95)—staunch defender of Darwin and Aldous Huxley's grandfather—told the

British Parliament that it was literally impossible for mankind to exhaust the oceans.

Their power of generation was simply too great, as far as he could determine, compared

to even the most assiduous human predations. It's been an even shorter fifty years since

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* ignited the environmental movement. 168 Fifty years! That's

nothing! That's not even yesterday.

We've only just developed the conceptual tools and technologies that allow us to

understand the web of life, however imperfectly. We deserve a bit of sympathy, in

consequence, for the hypothetical outrage of our destructive behaviour. Sometimes we

don't know any better. Sometimes we do know better, but haven't yet formulated any

practical alternatives. It's not as if life is easy for human beings, after all, even now—and

it's only a few decades ago that the majority of human beings were starving, diseased and

illiterate. 169 Wealthy as we are (increasingly, everywhere) we still only live decades that

can be counted on our fingers. Even at present, it is the rare and fortunate family that

does not contain at least one member with a serious illness—and all will face that

problem eventually. We do what we can to make the best of things, in our vulnerability

and fragility, and the planet is harder on us than we are on it. We could cut ourselves

some slack.

Human beings are, after all, seriously remarkable creatures. We have no peers, and it's

not clear that we have any real limits. Things happen now that appeared humanly

impossible even at the same time in the recent past when we began to wake up to our

planet-sized responsibilities. A few weeks before writing this I happened across two

videos juxtaposed on YouTube. One showed the Olympic gold medal vault from 1956; the

other, the Olympic silver medal vault from 2012. It didn't even look like the same sport—

or the same animal. What McKayla Maroney did in 2012 would have been considered

superhuman in the fifties. Parkour, a sport derived from French military obstacle course

training, is amazing, as is free running. I watch compilations of such performances with

unabashed admiration. Some of the kids jump off three-storey buildings without injury.

It's dangerous—and amazing. Crane climbers are so brave it rattles the mind. The same

goes for extreme mountain bikers, freestyle snowboarders, surfers of fifty-foot waves, and

skateboarders.

The boys who shot up Columbine High School, whom we discussed earlier, had

appointed themselves judges of the human race—like the TEDx professor, although much

more extreme; like Chris, my doomed friend. For Eric Harris, the more literate of the two

killers, human beings were a failed and corrupt species. Once a presupposition such as

that is accepted, its inner logic will inevitably manifest itself. If something is a plague, as

David Attenborough has it,[170] or a cancer, as the Club of Rome claimed, [171] the person who eradicates it is a hero—a veritable planetary saviour, in this case. A real messiah

might follow through with his rigorous moral logic, and eliminate himself, as well. This is

what mass murderers, driven by near-infinite resentment, typically do. Even their own

Being does not justify the existence of humanity. In fact, they kill themselves precisely to

demonstrate the purity of their commitment to annihilation. No one in the modern world

may without objection express the opinion that existence would be bettered by the

absence of Jews, blacks, Muslims, or Englishmen. Why, then, is it virtuous to propose

that the planet might be better off, if there were fewer people on it? I can't help but see a

skeletal, grinning face, gleeful at the possibility of the apocalypse, hiding not so very far

behind such statements. And why does it so often seem to be the very people standing so

visibly against prejudice who so often appear to feel obligated to denounce humanity

itself?

I have seen university students, particularly those in the humanities, suffer genuine

declines in their mental health from being philosophically berated by such defenders of

the planet for their existence as members of the human species. It's worse, I think, for

young men. As privileged beneficiaries of the patriarchy, their accomplishments are

considered unearned. As possible adherents of rape culture, they're sexually suspect.

Their ambitions make them plunderers of the planet. They're not welcome. At the junior

high, high school and university level, they're falling behind educationally. When my son

was fourteen, we discussed his grades. He was doing very well, he said, matter-of-factly,

for a boy. I inquired further. Everyone knew, he said, that girls do better in school than

boys. His intonation indicated surprise at my ignorance of something so self-evident.

While writing this, I received the latest edition of *The Economist*. The cover story? “The

202

Weaker Sex”—meaning males. In modern universities women now make up more than

50 percent of the students in more than two-thirds of all disciplines.

Boys are suffering, in the modern world. They are more disobedient—negatively—or

more independent—positively—than girls, and they suffer for this, throughout their pre-

university educational career. They are less agreeable (agreeableness being a personality

trait associated with compassion, empathy and avoidance of conflict) and less susceptible

to anxiety and depression,[172] at least after both sexes hit puberty.[173] Boys’ interests tilt towards things; girls’ interests tilt towards people. [174] Strikingly, these differences,

strongly influenced by biological factors, are most pronounced in the Scandinavian

societies where gender-equality has been pushed hardest: this is the opposite of what

would be expected by those who insist, ever more loudly, that gender is a social

construct. It isn’t. This isn’t a debate. The data are in.[175]

Boys like competition, and they don’t like to obey, particularly when they are

adolescents. During that time, they are driven to escape their families, and establish their

own independent existence. There is little difference between doing that and challenging

authority. Schools, which were set up in the late 1800s precisely to inculcate

obedience, 176 do not take kindly to provocative and daring behaviour, no matter how

tough-minded and competent it might show a boy (or a girl) to be. Other factors play

their role in the decline of boys. Girls will, for example, play boys' games, but boys are

much more reluctant to play girls' games. This is in part because it is admirable for a girl

to win when competing with a boy. It is also OK for her to lose to a boy. For a boy to beat

a girl, however, it is often not OK—and just as often, it is even less OK for him to lose.

Imagine that a boy and a girl, aged nine, get into a fight. Just for engaging, the boy is

highly suspect. If he wins, he's pathetic. If he loses—well, his life might as well be over.

Beat up by a girl.

Girls can win by winning in their own hierarchy—by being good at what girls value, as

girls. They can add to this victory by winning in the boys' hierarchy. Boys, however, can

only win by winning in the male hierarchy. They will lose status, among girls *and* boys, by

being good at what girls value. It costs them in reputation among the boys, and in

attractiveness among the girls. Girls aren't attracted to boys who are their friends, even

though they might like them, whatever that means. They are attracted to boys who win

status contests with other boys. If you're male, however, you just can't hammer a female

as hard as you would a male. Boys can't (won't) play truly competitive games with girls. It

isn't clear how they can win. As the game turns into a girls' game, therefore, the boys

leave. Are the universities—particularly the humanities—about to become a girls' game?

Is this what we want?

The situation in the universities (and in educational institutions in general) is far more

problematic than the basic statistics indicate. 177 If you eliminate the so-called STEM

(science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programs (excluding psychology),

the female/male ratio is even more skewed.178 Almost 80 percent of students majoring in

the fields of healthcare, public administration, psychology and education, which comprise

one-quarter of all degrees, are female. The disparity is still rapidly increasing. At this rate,

there will be very few men in most university disciplines in fifteen years. This is not good

news for men. It might even be catastrophic news for men. But it's also not good news for

women.

Career and Marriage

The women at female-dominated institutes of higher education are finding it increasingly

difficult to arrange a dating relationship of even moderate duration. In consequence, they

must settle, if inclined, for a hook-up, or sequential hook-ups. Perhaps this is a move

forward, in terms of sexual liberation, but I doubt it. I think it's terrible for the girls.[179] A

stable, loving relationship is highly desirable, for men as well as women. For women,

however, it is often what is most wanted. From 1997 to 2012, according to the Pew

Research Centre,[180] the number of women aged 18 to 34 who said that a successful

marriage is one of the most important things in life rose from 28 to 37 percent (an

increase of more than 30 percent **fn2**). The number of young men who said the same thing

declined 15 percent over the same period (from 35 to 29 percent **fn3**). During that time,

the proportion of married people over 18 continued to decline, down from three-quarters

in 1960 to half now. 181 Finally, among never-married adults aged 30 to 59, men are three

times as likely as women to say they do not ever want to marry (27 vs 8 percent).

Who decided, anyway, that career is more important than love and family? Is working

eighty hours a week at a high-end law firm truly worth the sacrifices required for that

kind of success? And if it is worth it, why is it worth it? A minority of people (mostly

men, who score low in the trait of agreeableness, again) are hyper-competitive, and want

to win at any cost. A minority will find the work intrinsically fascinating. But most aren't,

and most won't, and money doesn't seem to improve people's lives, once they have

enough to avoid the bill collectors. Furthermore, most high-performing and high-earning

females have high-performing and high-earning partners—and that matters more to

women. The Pew data also indicate that a spouse with a desirable job is a high priority for

almost 80 percent of never-married but marriage-seeking women (but for less than 50

percent of men).

When they hit their thirties, most of the top-rate female lawyers bail out of their high-

pressure careers. 182 Only 15 percent of equity partners at the two hundred biggest US law

firms are women.183 This figure hasn't changed much in the last fifteen years, even

though female associates and staff attorneys are plentiful. It also isn't because the law

firms don't want the women to stay around and succeed. There is a chronic shortage of

excellent people, regardless of sex, and law firms are desperate to retain them.

The women who leave want a job—and a life—that allows them some time. After law

school and articling and the few first years of work, they develop other interests. This is

common knowledge in the big firms (although it is not something that people are

comfortable articulating in public, men and women alike). I recently watched a McGill

University professor, female, lecture a room full of female law partners or near-partners

about how lack of childcare facilities and “male definitions of success” impeded their

career progress and caused women to leave. I knew most of the women in the room. We

had talked at great length. I knew they knew that none of this was at all the problem.

They had nannies, and they could afford them. They had already outsourced all their

domestic obligations and necessities. They understood, as well—and perfectly well—that

it was the market that defined success, not the men they worked with. If you are earning

$650 an hour in Toronto as a top lawyer, and your client in Japan phones you at 4 a.m. on

a Sunday, you answer. Now. You answer, now, even if you have just gone back to sleep

after feeding the baby. You answer because some hyper-ambitious legal associate in New

York would be happy to answer, if you don’t—and that’s why the market defines the

work.

The increasingly short supply of university-educated men poses a problem of increasing

severity for women who want to marry, as well as date. First, women have a strong

proclivity to marry across or up the economic dominance hierarchy. They prefer a partner

of equal or greater status. This holds true cross-culturally. 184 The same does not hold, by

the way, for men, who are perfectly willing to marry across or down (as the Pew data

indicate), although they show a preference for somewhat younger mates. The recent trend

towards the hollowing-out of the middle class has also been increasing as resource-rich

women tend more and more185 to partner with resource-rich men. Because of this, and

because of the decline in high-paying manufacturing jobs for men (one of six men of

employable age is currently without work in the US), marriage is now something

increasingly reserved for the rich. I can't help finding that amusing, in a blackly ironic

manner. The oppressive patriarchal institution of marriage has now become a luxury.

Why would the rich tyrannize themselves?

Why do women want an employed partner and, preferably, one of higher status? In no

small part, it's because women become more vulnerable when they have children. They

need someone competent to support mother and child when that becomes necessary. It's

a perfectly rational compensatory act, although it may also have a biological basis. Why

would a woman who decides to take responsibility for one or more infants want an adult

to look after as well? So, the unemployed working man is an undesirable specimen—and

single motherhood an undesirable alternative. Children in father-absent homes are four

times as likely to be poor. That means their mothers are poor too. Fatherless children are

at much greater risk for drug and alcohol abuse. Children living with married biological

parents are less anxious, depressed and delinquent than children living with one or more

non-biological parent. Children in single-parent families are also twice as likely to commit

suicide.[186]

The strong turn towards political correctness in universities has exacerbated the

problem. The voices shouting against oppression have become louder, it seems, in precise

proportion to how equal—even now increasingly skewed against men—the schools have

become. There are whole disciplines in universities forthrightly hostile towards men.

These are the areas of study, dominated by the postmodern/neo-Marxist claim that

Western culture, in particular, is an oppressive structure, created by white men to

dominate and exclude women (and other select groups); successful only because of that

domination and exclusion.[187]

The Patriarchy: Help or Hindrance?

Of course, culture *is* an oppressive structure. *It's always been that way.* It's a fundamental,

universal existential reality. The tyrannical king is a symbolic truth; an archetypal

constant. What we inherit from the past is willfully blind, and out of date. It's a ghost, a

machine, and a monster. It must be rescued, repaired and kept at bay by the attention and

effort of the living. It crushes, as it hammers us into socially acceptable shape, and it

wastes great potential. But it offers great gain, too. Every word we speak is a gift from our

ancestors. Every thought we think was thought previously by someone smarter. The

highly functional infrastructure that surrounds us, particularly in the West, is a gift from

our ancestors: the comparatively uncorrupt political and economic systems, the

technology, the wealth, the lifespan, the freedom, the luxury, and the opportunity.

Culture takes with one hand, but in some fortunate places it gives more with the other.

To think about culture only as oppressive is ignorant and ungrateful, as well as

dangerous. This is not to say (as I am hoping the content of this book has made

abundantly clear, so far) that culture should not be subject to criticism.

Consider this, as well, in regard to oppression: *any hierarchy creates winners and losers*. The

winners are, of course, more likely to justify the hierarchy and the losers to criticize it.

But (1) the collective pursuit of any valued goal produces a hierarchy (as some will be

better and some worse at that pursuit not matter what it is) and (2) it is the pursuit of

goals that in large part lends life its sustaining meaning. We experience almost all the

emotions that make life deep and engaging as a consequence of moving successfully

towards something deeply desired and valued. The price we pay for that involvement is

the inevitable creation of hierarchies of success, while the inevitable consequence is

difference in outcome. Absolute equality would therefore require the sacrifice of value

itself—and then there would be nothing worth living for. We might instead note with

gratitude that a complex, sophisticated culture allows for many games and many

successful players, and that a well-structured culture allows the individuals that compose

it to play and to win, in many different fashions.

It is also *perverse* to consider culture the creation of men. Culture is symbolically,

archetypally, mythically male. That's partly why the idea of "the patriarchy" is so easily

swallowed. But it is certainly the creation of humankind, not the creation of men (let

alone white men, who nonetheless contributed their fair share). European culture has

only been dominant, to the degree that it is dominant at all, for about four hundred years.

On the time scale of cultural evolution—which is to be measured, at minimum, in

thousands of years—such a timespan barely registers. Furthermore, even if women

contributed nothing substantial to art, literature and the sciences prior to the 1960s and

the feminist revolution (which is not something I believe), then the role they played

raising children and working on the farms was still instrumental in raising boys and

freeing up men—a very few men—so that humanity could propagate itself and strive

forward.

Here's an alternative theory: throughout history, men and women both struggled

terribly for freedom from the overwhelming horrors of privation and necessity. Women

were often at a disadvantage during that struggle, as they had all the vulnerabilities of

men, with the extra reproductive burden, and less physical strength. In addition to the

filth, misery, disease, starvation, cruelty and ignorance that characterized the lives of both

sexes, back before the twentieth century (when even people in the Western world

typically existed on less than a dollar a day in today's money) women also had to put up

with the serious practical inconvenience of menstruation, the high probability of

unwanted pregnancy, the chance of death or serious damage during childbirth, and the

burden of too many young children. Perhaps that is sufficient reason for the different

legal and practical treatment of men and women that characterized most societies prior to

the recent technological revolutions, including the invention of the birth control pill. At

least such things might be taken into account, before the assumption that men tyrannized

women is accepted as a truism.

It looks to me like the so-called oppression of the patriarchy was instead an imperfect

collective attempt by men and women, stretching over millennia, to free each other from

privation, disease and drudgery. The recent case of Arunachalam Muruganantham

provides a salutary example. This man, the "tampon king" of India, became unhappy

because his wife had to use dirty rags during her menstrual period. She told him it was

either expensive sanitary napkins, or milk for the family. He spent the next fourteen years

in a state of insanity, by his neighbours' judgment, trying to rectify the problem. Even his

wife and his mother abandoned him, briefly, terrified as they became of his obsession.

When he ran out of female volunteers to test his product, he took to wearing a bladder of

pig's blood as a replacement. I can't see how this behaviour would have improved his

popularity or status. Now his low-cost and locally made napkins are distributed across

India, manufactured by women-run self-help groups. His users have been provided with

freedom they never previously experienced. In 2014, this high-school dropout was named

one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world. I am unwilling to

consider personal gain Muruganantham's primary motivation. Is he part of the patriarchy?

In 1847, James Young Simpson used ether to help a woman who had a deformed pelvis

give birth. Afterwards, he switched to the better-performing chloroform. The first baby

delivered under its influence was named "Anaesthesia." By 1853, chloroform was

esteemed enough to be used by Queen Victoria, who delivered her seventh baby under its

influence. Remarkably soon afterward, the option of painless childbirth was available

everywhere. A few people warned of the danger of opposing God's pronouncement to

women in Genesis 3:16: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow

thou shalt bring forth children …" Some also opposed its use among males: young,

healthy, courageous men simply did not need anaesthesia. Such opposition was

ineffectual. Use of anaesthesia spread with extreme rapidity (and far faster than would be

possible today). Even prominent churchmen supported its use.

The first practical tampon, Tampax, didn't arrive until the 1930s. It was invented by Dr.

Earle Cleveland Haas. He made it of compressed cotton, and designed an applicator from

paper tubes. This helped lessen resistance to the products by those who objected to the

self-touching that might otherwise occur. By the early 1940s, 25 percent of women were

using them. Thirty years later, it was 70 percent. Now it's four out of five, with the

remainder relying on pads, which are now hyper-absorbent, and held in place by effective

adhesives (opposed to the awkwardly placed, bulky, belted, diaper-like sanitary napkins of

the 1970s). Did Muruganantham, Simpson and Haas oppress women, or free them? What

about Gregory Goodwin Pincus, who invented the birth control pill? In what manner were

these practical, enlightened, persistent men part of a constricting patriarchy?

Why do we teach our young people that our incredible culture is the result of male

oppression? Blinded by this central assumption disciplines as diverse as education, social

work, art history, gender studies, literature, sociology and, increasingly, law actively treat

men as oppressors and men's activity as inherently destructive. They also often directly

promote radical political action—radical by all the norms of the societies within which

they are situated—which they do not distinguish from education. The Pauline Jewett

Institute of Women's and Gender Studies at Ottawa's Carleton University, for example,

encourages activism as part of their mandate. The Gender Studies Department at Queen's

University in Kingston, Ontario, “teaches feminist, anti-racist, and queer theories and

methods that centre activism for social change”—indicating support for the supposition

that university education should above all foster political engagement of a particular kind.

Postmodernism and the Long Arm of Marx

These disciplines draw their philosophy from multiple sources. All are heavily influenced

by the Marxist humanists. One such figure is Max Horkheimer, who developed critical

theory in the 1930s. Any brief summary of his ideas is bound to be oversimplified, but

Horkheimer regarded himself as a Marxist. He believed that Western principles of

individual freedom or the free market were merely masks that served to disguise the true

conditions of the West: inequality, domination and exploitation. He believed that

intellectual activity should be devoted to social change, instead of mere understanding,

and hoped to emancipate humanity from its enslavement. Horkheimer and his Frankfurt

School of associated thinkers—first, in Germany and later, in the US—aimed at a full-

scale critique and transformation of Western civilization.

More important in recent years has been the work of French philosopher Jacques

Derrida, leader of the postmodernists, who came into vogue in the late 1970s. Derrida

described his own ideas as a radicalized form of Marxism. Marx attempted to reduce

history and society to economics, considering culture the oppression of the poor by the

rich. When Marxism was put into practice in the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam,

Cambodia and elsewhere, economic resources were brutally redistributed. Private

property was eliminated, and rural people forcibly collectivized. The result? Tens of

millions of people died. Hundreds of millions more were subject to oppression rivalling

that still operative in North Korea, the last classic communist holdout. The resulting

economic systems were corrupt and unsustainable. The world entered a prolonged and

extremely dangerous cold war. The citizens of those societies lived the life of the lie,

betraying their families, informing on their neighbours—existing in misery, without

complaint (or else).

Marxist ideas were very attractive to intellectual utopians. One of the primary architects

of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, Khieu Samphan, received a doctorate at the Sorbonne

before he became the nominal head of Cambodia in the mid-1970s. In his doctoral thesis,

written in 1959, he argued that the work done by non-farmers in Cambodia's cities was

unproductive: bankers, bureaucrats and businessmen added nothing to society. Instead,

they parasitized the genuine value produced through agriculture, small industry and craft.

Samphan's ideas were favourably looked upon by the French intellectuals who granted

him his Ph.D. Back in Cambodia, he was provided with the opportunity to put his

theories into practice. The Khmer Rouge evacuated Cambodia's cities, drove all the

inhabitants into the countryside, closed the banks, banned the use of currency, and

destroyed all the markets. A quarter of the Cambodian population were worked to death

in the countryside, in the killing fields.

Lest We Forget: Ideas Have Consequences.

When the communists established the Soviet Union after the First World War, people

could be forgiven for hoping that the utopian collectivist dreams their new leaders

purveyed were possible. The decayed social order of the late nineteenth century produced

the trenches and mass slaughters of the Great War. The gap between rich and poor was

extreme, and most people slaved away in conditions worse than those later described by

Orwell. Although the West received word of the horror perpetrated by Lenin after the

Russian Revolution, it remained difficult to evaluate his actions from afar. Russia was in

post-monarchical chaos, and the news of widespread industrial development and

redistribution of property to those who had so recently been serfs provided reason for

hope. To complicate things further, the USSR (and Mexico) supported the democratic

Republicans when the Spanish Civil War broke out, in 1936. They were fighting against

the essentially fascist Nationalists, who had overthrown the fragile democracy established

only five years previously, and who found support with the Nazis and Italian fascists.

The intelligentsia in America, Great Britain and elsewhere were severely frustrated by

their home countries' neutrality. Thousands of foreigners streamed into Spain to fight for

the Republicans, serving in the International Brigades. George Orwell was one of them.

Ernest Hemingway served there as a journalist, and was a supporter of the Republicans.

Politically concerned young Americans, Canadians and Brits felt a moral obligation to

stop talking and start fighting.

All of this drew attention away from concurrent events in the Soviet Union. In the

1930s, during the Great Depression, the Stalinist Soviets sent two million kulaks, their

richest peasants, to Siberia (those with a small number of cows, a couple of hired hands,

or a few acres more than was typical). From the communist viewpoint, these kulaks had

gathered their wealth by plundering those around them, and deserved their fate. Wealth

signified oppression, and private property was theft. It was time for some equity. More

than thirty thousand kulaks were shot on the spot. Many more met their fate at the hands

of their most jealous, resentful and unproductive neighbours, who used the high ideals of

communist collectivization to mask their murderous intent.

The kulaks were “enemies of the people,” apes, scum, vermin, filth and swine. “We will

make soap out of the kulak,” claimed one particularly brutal cadre of city-dwellers,

mobilized by party and Soviet executive committees, and sent out into the countryside.

The kulaks were driven, naked, into the streets, beaten, and forced to dig their own

graves. The women were raped. Their belongings were “expropriated,” which, in practice,

meant that their houses were stripped down to the rafters and ceiling beams and

everything was stolen. In many places, the non-kulak peasants resisted, particularly the

women, who took to surrounding the persecuted families with their bodies. Such

resistance proved futile. The kulaks who didn’t die were exiled to Siberia, often in the

middle of the night. The trains started in February, in the bitter Russian cold. Housing of

the most substandard kind awaited them upon arrival on the desert taiga. Many died,

particularly children, from typhoid, measles and scarlet fever.

The “parasitical” kulaks were, in general, the most skillful and hardworking farmers. A

small minority of people are responsible for most of the production in any field, and

farming proved no different. Agricultural output crashed. What little remained was taken

by force out of the countryside and into the cities. Rural people who went out into the

fields after the harvest to glean single grains of wheat for their hungry families risked

execution. Six million people died of starvation in the Ukraine, the breadbasket of the

Soviet Union, in the 1930s. “To eat your own children is a barbarian act,” declared

posters of the Soviet regime.

Despite more than mere rumours of such atrocities, attitudes towards communism

remained consistently positive among many Western intellectuals. There were other

things to worry about, and the Second World War allied the Soviet Union with the

Western countries opposing Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito. Certain watchful eyes

remained open, nonetheless. Malcolm Muggeridge published a series of articles describing

Soviet demolition of the peasantry as early as 1933, for the *Manchester Guardian*. George

Orwell understood what was going on under Stalin, and he made it widely known. He

published *Animal Farm*, a fable satirizing the Soviet Union, in 1945, despite encountering

serious resistance to the book's release. Many who should have known better retained

their blindness for long after this. Nowhere was this truer than France, and nowhere truer

in France than among the intellectuals.

France's most famous mid-century philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, was a well-known

communist, although not a card-carrier, until he denounced the Soviet incursion into

Hungary in 1956. He remained an advocate for Marxism, nonetheless, and did not finally

break with the Soviet Union until 1968, when the Soviets violently suppressed the

Czechoslovakians during the Prague Spring.

Not long after came the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*,

which we have discussed rather extensively in previous chapters. As noted (and is worth

noting again), this book utterly demolished communism's moral credibility —first in the

West, and then in the Soviet System itself. It circulated in underground *samizdat* format.

Russians had twenty-four hours to read their rare copy before handing it to the next

waiting mind. A Russian-language reading was broadcast into the Soviet Union by Radio

Liberty.

Solzhenitsyn argued that the Soviet system could have never survived without tyranny

and slave labour; that the seeds of its worst excesses were definitively sowed in the time

of Lenin (for whom the Western communists still served as apologists); and that it was

propped up by endless lies, both individual and public. Its sins could not be blamed on a

simple cult of personality, as its supporters continued to claim. Solzhenitsyn documented

the Soviet Union's extensive mistreatment of political prisoners, its corrupt legal system,

and its mass murders, and showed in painstaking detail how these were not aberrations

but direct expressions of the underlying communist philosophy. No one could stand up

for communism after *The Gulag Archipelago*—not even the communists themselves.

This did not mean that the fascination Marxist ideas had for intellectuals—particularly

French intellectuals—disappeared. It merely transformed. Some refused outright to learn.

Sartre denounced Solzhenitsyn as a “dangerous element.” Derrida, more subtle,

substituted the idea of power for the idea of money, and continued on his merry way.

Such linguistic sleight-of-hand gave all the barely repentant Marxists still inhabiting the

intellectual pinnacles of the West the means to retain their world-view. Society was no

longer repression of the poor by the rich. It was oppression of everyone by the powerful.

According to Derrida, hierarchical structures emerged only to include (the beneficiaries

of that structure) and to exclude (everyone else, who were therefore oppressed). Even

that claim wasn’t sufficiently radical. Derrida claimed that divisiveness and oppression

were built right into language—built into the very categories we use to pragmatically

simplify and negotiate the world. There are “women” only because men gain by excluding

them. There are “males and females” only because members of that more heterogeneous

group benefit by excluding the tiny minority of people whose biological sexuality is

amorphous. Science only benefits the scientists. Politics only benefits the politicians. In

Derrida's view, hierarchies exist because they gain from oppressing those who are

omitted. It is this ill-gotten gain that allows them to flourish.

Derrida famously said (although he denied it, later): "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte"—often

translated as "there is nothing outside the text." His supporters say that is a

mistranslation, and that the English equivalent should have been "there is no outside-

text." It remains difficult, either way, to read the statement as saying anything other than

"everything is interpretation," and that is how Derrida's work has generally been

interpreted.

It is almost impossible to over-estimate the nihilistic and destructive nature of this

philosophy. It puts the act of categorization itself in doubt. It negates the idea that

distinctions might be drawn between things for any reasons other than that of raw power.

Biological distinctions between men and women? Despite the existence of an

overwhelming, multi-disciplinary scientific literature indicating that sex differences are

powerfully influenced by biological factors, science is just another game of power, for

Derrida and his post-modern Marxist acolytes, making claims to benefit those at the

pinnacle of the scientific world. There are no facts. Hierarchical position and reputation as

a consequence of skill and competence? All definitions of skill and of competence are

merely made up by those who benefit from them, to exclude others, and to benefit

personally and selfishly.

There is sufficient truth to Derrida's claims to account, in part, for their insidious

nature. Power is a fundamental motivational force ("a," not "the"). People compete to

rise to the top, and they care where they are in dominance hierarchies. But (and this is

where you separate the metaphorical boys from the men, philosophically) *the fact that*

power plays a role in human motivation does not mean that it plays the only role, or even the

primary role. Likewise, the fact that we can never know everything does make all our

observations and utterances dependent on taking some things into account and leaving

other things out (as we discussed extensively in Rule 10). That does not justify the claim

that everything is interpretation, or that categorization is just exclusion. Beware of single

cause interpretations—and beware the people who purvey them.

Although the facts cannot speak for themselves (just as an expanse of land spread out

before a voyager cannot tell him how to journey through it), and although there are a

myriad ways to interact with—even to perceive—even a small number of objects, that

does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Some hurt—yourself and others.

Others put you on a collision course with society. Some are not sustainable across time.

Others do not get you where you want to go. Many of these constraints are built in to us,

as a consequence of billions of years of evolutionary processes. Others emerge as we are

socialized into cooperating and competing peacefully and productively with others. Still

more interpretations emerge as we discard counterproductive strategies through learning.

An endless number of interpretations, certainly: that is not different than saying an

endless number of problems. *But a seriously bounded number of viable solutions.* Otherwise life

would be easy. And it's not.

210

Now, I have some beliefs that might be regarded as left-leaning. I think, for example,

that the tendency for valuable goods to distribute themselves with pronounced inequality

constitutes an ever-present threat to the stability of society. I think there is good evidence

for that. That does not mean that the solution to the problem is self-evident. We don't

know how to redistribute wealth without introducing a whole host of other problems.

Different Western societies have tried different approaches. The Swedes, for example,

push equality to its limit. The US takes the opposite tack, assuming that the net wealth-

creation of a more free-for-all capitalism constitutes the rising tide that lifts all boats. The

results of these experiments are not all in, and countries differ very much in relevant

ways. Differences in history, geographic area, population size and ethnic diversity make

direct comparisons very difficult. But it certainly is the case that forced redistribution, in

the name of utopian equality, is a cure to shame the disease.

I think, as well (on what might be considered the leftish side), that the incremental

remake of university administrations into analogues of private corporations is a mistake. I

think that the science of management is a pseudo-discipline. I believe that government

can, sometimes, be a force for good, as well as the necessary arbiter of a small set of

necessary rules. Nonetheless, I do not understand why our society is providing public

funding to institutions and educators whose stated, conscious and explicit aim is the

demolition of the culture that supports them. Such people have a perfect right to their

opinions and actions, if they remain lawful. But they have no reasonable claim to public

funding. If radical right-wingers were receiving state funding for political operations

disguised as university courses, as the radical left-wingers clearly are, the uproar from

progressives across North America would be deafening.

There are other serious problems lurking in the radical disciplines, apart from the

falseness of their theories and methods, and their insistence that collective political

activism is morally obligatory. There isn't a shred of hard evidence to support any of their

central claims: that Western society is pathologically patriarchal; that the prime lesson of

history is that men, rather than nature, were the primary source of the oppression of

women (rather than, as in most cases, their partners and supporters); that all hierarchies

are based on power and aimed at exclusion. Hierarchies exist for many reasons—some

arguably valid, some not—and are incredibly ancient, evolutionarily speaking. Do male

crustaceans oppress female crustaceans? Should their hierarchies be upended?

In societies that are well-functioning—not in comparison to a hypothetical utopia, but

contrasted with other existing or historical cultures— *competence*, not power, is a prime

determiner of status. Competence. Ability. Skill. Not *power*. This is obvious both

anecdotally and factually. No one with brain cancer is equity-minded enough to refuse the

service of the surgeon with the best education, the best reputation and, perhaps, the

highest earnings. Furthermore, the most valid personality trait predictors of long-term

success in Western countries are intelligence (as measured with cognitive ability or IQ

tests) and conscientiousness (a trait characterized by industriousness and orderliness).188

There are exceptions. Entrepreneurs and artists are higher in openness to experience, 189

another cardinal personality trait, than in conscientiousness. But openness is associated

with verbal intelligence and creativity, so that exception is appropriate and

understandable. The predictive power of these traits, mathematically and economically

speaking, is exceptionally high—among the highest, in terms of power, of anything ever

actually measured at the harder ends of the social sciences. A good battery of

personality/cognitive tests can increase the probability of employing someone more

competent than average from 50:50 to 85:15. These are the facts, as well supported as

anything in the social sciences (and this is saying more than you might think, as the social

sciences are more effective disciplines than their cynical critics appreciate). Thus, not only

is the state supporting one-sided radicalism, it is also supporting indoctrination. We do

not teach our children that the world is flat. Neither should we teach them unsupported

ideologically-predicated theories about the nature of men and women—or the nature of

hierarchy.

It is not unreasonable to note (if the deconstructionists would leave it at that) that

science can be biased by the interests of power, and to warn against that—or to point out

that evidence is too often what powerful people, including scientists, decide it is. After all,

scientists are people too, and people like power, just like lobsters like power —just like

deconstructionists like to be known for their ideas, and strive rightly to sit atop their

academic hierarchies. But that doesn't mean that science—or even deconstructionism—is

only about power. Why believe such a thing? Why insist upon it? Perhaps it's this: *if only*

power exists, then the use of power becomes fully justifiable. There is no bounding such use by

evidence, method, logic, or even the necessity for coherence. There is no bounding by

anything "outside the text." That leaves opinion—and force—and the use of force is all

too attractive, under such circumstances, just as its employment in the service of that

opinion is all too certain. The insane and incomprehensible postmodern insistence that all

gender differences are socially constructed, for example, becomes all too understandable

when its moral imperative is grasped—when its justification for force is once and for all

understood: *Society must be altered, or bias eliminated, until all outcomes are equitable*. But the

bedrock of the social constructionist position is the wish for the latter, not belief in the

justice of the former. Since all outcome inequalities must be eliminated (inequality being

the heart of all evil), then all gender differences must be regarded as socially constructed.

Otherwise the drive for equality would be too radical, and the doctrine too blatantly

propagandistic. Thus, the order of logic is reversed, so that the ideology can be

camouflaged. The fact that such statements lead immediately to internal inconsistencies

within the ideology is never addressed. Gender is constructed, but an individual who

desires gender re-assignment surgery is to be unarguably considered a man trapped in a

woman's body (or vice versa). *The fact that both of these cannot logically be true, simultaneously,*

is just ignored (or rationalized away with another appalling post-modern claim: that logic

itself—along with the techniques of science—is merely part of the oppressive patriarchal

system).

It is also the case, of course, that all outcomes cannot be equalized. First, outcomes

must be measured. Comparing the salaries of people who occupy the same position is

relatively straightforward (although complicated significantly by such things as date of

hire, given the difference in demand for workers, for example, at different time periods).

But there are other dimensions of comparison that are arguably equally relevant, such as

tenure, promotion rate, and social influence. The introduction of the "equal pay for equal

work" argument immediately complicates even salary comparison beyond practicality, for

one simple reason: who decides what work is equal? It's not possible. That's why the

marketplace exists. Worse is the problem of group comparison: women should make as

much as men. OK. Black women should make as much as white women. OK. Should

salary then be adjusted for all parameters of race? At what level of resolution? What racial

categories are “real”?

The U.S. National Institute of Health, to take a single bureaucratic example, recognizes

American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or other

Pacific Islander, and White. But there are more than five hundred separate American

Indian tribes. By what possible logic should “American Indian” therefore stand as a

canonical category? Osage tribal members have a yearly average income of $30K, while

Tohono O’odham’s make $11K. Are they equally oppressed? What about disabilities?

Disabled people should make as much as non-disabled people. OK. On the surface, that’s

a noble, compassionate, fair claim. But who is disabled? Is someone living with a parent

with Alzheimer’s disabled? If not, why not? What about someone with a lower IQ?

Someone less attractive? Someone overweight? Some people clearly move through life

markedly overburdened with problems that are beyond their control, but it is a rare

person indeed who isn't suffering from at least one serious catastrophe at any given time

—particularly if you include their family in the equation. And why shouldn't you? Here's

the fundamental problem: *group identity can be fractionated right down to the level of the*

individual. That sentence should be written in capital letters. Every person is unique—and

not just in a trivial manner: importantly, significantly, meaningfully unique. Group

membership cannot capture that variability. Period.

None of this complexity is ever discussed by the postmodern/Marxist thinkers. Instead,

their ideological approach fixes a point of truth, like the North Star, and forces everything

to rotate around it. The claim that all gender differences are a consequence of

socialization is neither provable, nor disprovable, in some sense, because culture can be

brought to bear with such force on groups or individuals that virtually any outcome is

attainable, if we are willing to bear the cost. We know, for example, from studies of

adopted-out identical twins,[190] that culture can produce a fifteen-point (or one standard

deviation) increase in IQ (roughly the difference between the average high school student

and the average state college student) at the cost of a three-standard-deviation increase in

wealth. [191] What this means, approximately, is that two identical twins, separated at birth,

will differ in IQ by fifteen points if the first twin is raised in a family that is poorer than

85 percent of families and the second is raised in a family richer than 95 percent of

families. Something similar has recently been demonstrated with education, rather than

wealth. [192] We don't know what it would cost in wealth or differential education to

produce a more extreme transformation.

What such studies imply is that we could probably minimize the innate differences

between boys and girls, if we were willing to exert enough pressure. This would in no way

ensure that we were freeing people of either gender to make their own choices. But choice

has no place in the ideological picture: if men and women act, voluntarily, to produce

gender-unequal outcomes, those very choices must have been determined by cultural

bias. In consequence, everyone is a brainwashed victim, wherever gender differences

exist, and the rigorous critical theoretician is morally obligated to set them straight. This

means that those already equity-minded Scandinavian males, who aren't much into

nursing, require even more retraining. The same goes, in principle, for Scandinavian

females, who aren't much into engineering.193 What might such retraining look like?

Where might its limits lie? Such things are often pushed past any reasonable limit before

they are discontinued. Mao's murderous Cultural Revolution should have taught us that.

Boys into Girls

It has become a tenet of a certain kind of social constructionist theory that the world

would be much improved if boys were socialized like girls. Those who put forward such

theories assume, first, that aggression is a learned behaviour, and can therefore simply

not be taught, and second (to take a particular example) that, "boys should be socialized

the way girls have been traditionally socialized, and they should be encouraged to develop

socially positive qualities such as tenderness, sensitivity to feelings, nurturance,

cooperative and aesthetic appreciation." In the opinions of such thinkers, aggression will

only be reduced when male adolescents and young adults "subscribe to the same

standards of behavior as have been traditionally encouraged for women. "194

There are so many things wrong with this idea that it is difficult to know where to

start. First, it is not the case that aggression is merely learned. Aggression is there at the

beginning. There are ancient biological circuits, so to speak, that underlie defensive and

predatory aggression. 195 They are so fundamental that they still operate in what are

known as decorticate cats, animals that have had the largest and most recently evolved

parts of their brain—an overwhelmingly large percentage of the total structure—entirely

removed. This suggests not only that aggression is innate, but that it is a consequence of

activity in extremely fundamental, basic brain areas. If the brain is a tree, then aggression

(along with hunger, thirst and sexual desire) is there in the very trunk.

And, in keeping with this, it appears that a subset of two-year-old boys (about 5

percent) are quite aggressive, by temperament. They take other kids' toys, kick, bite and

hit. Most are nonetheless socialized effectively by the age of four. 196 This is not, however,

because they have been encouraged to act like little girls. Instead, they are taught or

otherwise learn in early childhood to integrate their aggressive tendencies into more

sophisticated behavioural routines. Aggression underlies the drive to be outstanding, to

be unstoppable, to compete, to win—to be actively virtuous, at least along one dimension.

Determination is its admirable, pro-social face. Aggressive young children who don't

manage to render their temperament sophisticated by the end of infancy are doomed to

unpopularity, as their primordial antagonism no longer serves them socially at later ages.

Rejected by their peers, they lack further socialization opportunities and tend towards

outcast status. These are the individuals who remain much more inclined toward

antisocial and criminal behavior when adolescent and adult. But this does not at all mean

that the aggressive drive lacks either utility or value. At a minimum, it is necessary for

self-protection.

Compassion as a Vice

Many of the female clients (perhaps even a majority) that I see in my clinical practice have

trouble in their jobs and family lives not because they are too aggressive, but because they

are not aggressive enough. Cognitive-behavioural therapists call the treatment of such

people, generally characterized by the more feminine traits of agreeableness (politeness

and compassion) and neuroticism (anxiety and emotional pain), "assertiveness

training." 197 Insufficiently aggressive women—and men, although more rarely—do too

much for others. They tend to treat those around them as if they were distressed children.

They tend to be naïve. They assume that cooperation should be the basis of all social

transactions, and they avoid conflict (which means they avoid confronting problems in

their relationships as well as at work). They continually sacrifice for others. This may

sound virtuous—and it is definitely an attitude that has certain social advantages—but it

can and often does become counterproductively one-sided. Because too-agreeable people

bend over backwards for other people, they do not stand up properly for themselves.

Assuming that others think as they do, they expect—instead of ensuring—reciprocity for

their thoughtful actions. When this does not happen, they don't speak up. They do not or

cannot straightforwardly demand recognition. The dark side of their characters emerges,

because of their subjugation, and they become resentful.

I teach excessively agreeable people to note the emergence of such resentment, which is

a very important, although very toxic, emotion. There are only two major reasons for

resentment: being taken advantage of (or allowing yourself to be taken advantage of), or

whiny refusal to adopt responsibility and grow up. If you're resentful, look for the

reasons. Perhaps discuss the issue with someone you trust. Are you feeling hard done by,

in an immature manner? If, after some honest consideration, you don't think it's that,

perhaps someone is taking advantage of you. This means that you now face a moral

obligation to speak up for yourself. This might mean confronting your boss, or your

husband, or your wife, or your child, or your parents. It might mean gathering some

evidence, strategically, so that when you confront that person, you can give them several

examples of their misbehaviour (at least three), so they can't easily weasel out of your

accusations. It might mean failing to concede when they offer you their

counterarguments. People rarely have more than four at hand. If you remain unmoved,

they get angry, or cry, or run away. It's very useful to attend to tears in such situations.

They can be used to motivate guilt on the part of the accuser due, theoretically, to having

caused hurt feelings and pain. But tears are often shed in anger. A red face is a good cue.

If you can push your point past the first four responses and stand fast against the

consequent emotion, you will gain your target's attention—and, perhaps, their respect.

This is genuine conflict, however, and it's neither pleasant nor easy.

You must also know clearly what you want out of the situation, and be prepared to

clearly articulate your desire. It's a good idea to tell the person you are confronting exactly

what you would like them to do instead of what they have done or currently are doing.

You might think, "if they loved me, they would know what to do." That's the voice of

resentment. Assume ignorance before malevolence. No one has a direct pipeline to your

wants and needs—not even you. If you try to determine exactly what you want, you might

find that it is more difficult than you think. The person oppressing you is likely no wiser

than you, especially about you. Tell them directly what would be preferable, instead, after

you have sorted it out. Make your request as small and reasonable as possible—but

ensure that its fulfillment would satisfy you. In that manner, you come to the discussion

with a solution, instead of just a problem.

Agreeable, compassionate, empathic, conflict-averse people (all those traits group

together) let people walk on them, and they get bitter. They sacrifice themselves for

others, sometimes excessively, and cannot comprehend why that is not reciprocated.

Agreeable people are compliant, and this robs them of their independence. The danger

associated with this can be amplified by high trait neuroticism. Agreeable people will go

along with whoever makes a suggestion, instead of insisting, at least sometimes, on their

own way. So, they lose their way, and become indecisive and too easily swayed. If they

are, in addition, easily frightened and hurt, they have even less reason to strike out on

their own, as doing so exposes them to threat and danger (at least in the short term).

That's the pathway to dependent personality disorder, technically speaking.198 It might be

regarded as the polar opposite of antisocial personality disorder, the set of traits

characteristic of delinquency in childhood and adolescence and criminality in adulthood.

It would be lovely if the opposite of a criminal was a saint—but it's not the case. The

opposite of a criminal is an Oedipal mother, which is its own type of criminal.

The Oedipal mother (and fathers can play this role too, but it's comparatively rare) says

to her child, “I only live for you.” She does everything for her children. She ties their

shoes, and cuts up their food, and lets them crawl into bed with her and her partner far

too often. That’s a good and conflict-avoidant method for avoiding unwanted sexual

attention, as well.

The Oedipal mother makes a pact with herself, her children, and the devil himself. The

deal is this: “Above all, never leave me. In return, I will do everything for you. As you age

without maturing, you will become worthless and bitter, but you will never have to take

any responsibility, and everything you do that’s wrong will always be someone else’s

fault.” The children can accept or reject this—and they have some choice in the matter.

The Oedipal mother is the witch in the story of Hansel and Gretel. The two children in

that fairy tale have a new step-mother. She orders her husband to abandon his children in

the forest, as there is a famine and she thinks they eat too much. He obeys his wife, takes

his children deep into the woods and leaves them to their fate. Wandering, starving and

lonely, they come across a miracle. A house. And not just any house. A candy house. A

gingerbread house. A person who had not been rendered too caring, empathic,

sympathetic and cooperative might be skeptical, and ask, “Is this too good to be true?”

But the children are too young, and too desperate.

215

Inside the house is a kind old woman, rescuer of distraught children, kind patter of

heads and wiper of noses, all bosom and hips, ready to sacrifice herself to their every

wish, at a moment’s notice. She feeds the children anything they want, any time they

want, and they never have to do anything. But provision of that kind of care makes her

hungry. She puts Hansel into a cage, to fatten him up ever more efficiently. He fools her

into thinking he’s staying thin by offering her an old bone, when she tries to test his leg

for the desired tenderness. She gets too desperate to wait, eventually, and stokes the

oven, preparing to cook and eat the object of her doting. Gretel, who has apparently not

been lulled into full submission, waits for a moment of carelessness, and pushes the kind

old woman into the oven. The kids run away, and rejoin their father, who has thoroughly

repented of his evil actions.

In a household like that, the choicest cut of child is the spirit, and it's always consumed

first. Too much protection devastates the developing soul.

The witch in the Hansel and Gretel tale is the Terrible Mother, the dark half of the

symbolically feminine. Deeply social as we are in our essence, we tend to view the world

as a story, the characters of which are mother, father and child. The feminine, as a whole,

is unknown nature outside the bounds of culture, creation and destruction: she is the

protective arms of mother and the destructive element of time, the beautiful virgin-

mother and the swamp-dwelling hag. This archetypal entity was confused with an

objective, historical reality, back in the late 1800s, by a Swiss anthropologist named

Johann Jakob Bachofen. Bachofen proposed that humanity had passed through a series of

developmental stages in its history.

The first, roughly speaking (after a somewhat anarchic and chaotic beginning), was Das

Mutterrecht[199]—a society where women held the dominant positions of power, respect

and honour, where polyamory and promiscuity ruled, and where any certainty of paternity

was absent. The second, the Dionysian, was a phase of transition, during which these

original matriarchal foundations were overturned and power was taken by men. The third

phase, the Apollonian, still reigns today. The patriarchy rules, and each woman belongs

exclusively to one man. Bachofen's ideas became profoundly influential, in certain circles,

despite the absence of any historical evidence to support them. One Marija Gimbutas, for

example—an archaeologist—famously claimed in the 1980s and 1990s that a peaceful

goddess-and-woman-centred culture once characterized Neolithic Europe.[200] She claimed

that it was supplanted and suppressed by an invasive hierarchical warrior culture, which

laid the basis for modern society. Art historian Merlin Stone made the same argument in

his book *When God Was a Woman*.[201] This whole series of essentially

archetypal/mythological ideas became touchstones for the theology of the women's

movement and the matriarchal studies of 1970s feminism (Cynthia Eller, who wrote a

book criticizing such ideas— *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*—called this theology "an

ennobling lie"). 202

Carl Jung had encountered Bachofen's ideas of primordial matriarchy decades earlier.

Jung soon realized, however, that the developmental progression described by the earlier

Swiss thinker represented a psychological rather than a historical reality. He saw in

Bachofen's thought the same processes of projection of imaginative fantasy on to the

external world that had led to the population of the cosmos with constellations and gods.

In *The Origins and History of Consciousness*203 and *The Great Mother*204, Jung's collaborator Erich Neumann extended his colleague's analysis. Neumann traced the emergence of

consciousness, symbolically masculine, and contrasted it with its symbolically feminine,

material (mother, matrix) origins, subsuming Freud's theory of Oedipal parenting into a

broader archetypal model. For Neumann, and for Jung, consciousness—always

symbolically masculine, even in women—struggles upwards toward the light. Its

development is painful and anxiety-provoking, as it carries with it the realization of

vulnerability and death. It is constantly tempted to sink back down into dependency and

unconsciousness, and to shed its existential burden. It is aided in that pathological desire

by anything that opposes enlightenment, articulation, rationality, self-determination,

strength and competence—by anything that shelters too much, and therefore smothers

and devours. Such overprotection is Freud's Oedipal familial nightmare, which we are

rapidly transforming into social policy.

The Terrible Mother is an ancient symbol. It manifests itself, for example, in the form

of Tiamat, in the earliest written story we have recovered, the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*.

Tiamat is the mother of all things, gods and men alike. She is the unknown and chaos and

the nature that gives rise to all forms. But she is also the female dragon-deity who moves

to destroy her own children, when they carelessly kill their father and attempt to live on

the corpse that remains. The Terrible Mother is the spirit of careless unconsciousness,

tempting the ever-striving spirit of awareness and enlightenment down into the protective

womb-like embrace of the underworld. It's the terror young men feel towards attractive

women, who are nature itself, ever ready to reject them, intimately, at the deepest

possible level. Nothing inspires self-consciousness, undermines courage, and fosters

feelings of nihilism and hatred more than that—except, perhaps, the too-tight embrace of

too-caring mom.

The Terrible Mother appears in many fairy tales, and in many stories for adults. In the

Sleeping Beauty, she is the Evil Queen, dark nature herself—Maleficent, in the Disney

version. The royal parents of Princess Aurora fail to invite this force of the night to their

baby daughter's christening. Thus, they shelter her too much from the destructive and

dangerous side of reality, preferring that she grow up untroubled by such things. Their

reward? At puberty, she is still unconscious. The masculine spirit, her prince, is both a

man who could save her, by tearing her from her parents, and her own consciousness,

trapped in a dungeon by the machinations of the dark side of femininity. When that

prince escapes, and presses the Evil Queen too hard, she turns into the Dragon of Chaos

itself. The symbolic masculine defeats her with truth and faith, and finds the princess,

whose eyes he opens with a kiss.

It might be objected (as it was, with Disney's more recent and deeply propagandistic

Frozen) that a woman does not need a man to rescue her. That may be true, and it may

not. It may be that only the woman who wants (or has) a child needs a man to rescue her

—or at least to support and aid her. In any case, it is certain that a woman needs

consciousness be rescued, and, as noted above, consciousness is symbolically masculine

and has been since the beginning of time (in the guise both of order and of the Logos, the

mediating principle). The Prince could be a lover, but could also be a woman's own

attentive wakefulness, clarity of vision, and tough-minded independence. Those are

masculine traits—in actuality, as well as symbolically, as men are actually less tender-

minded and agreeable than women, on average, and are less susceptible to anxiety and

emotional pain. And, to say it again: (1) this is most true in those Scandinavian nations

where the most steps towards gender equality have been taken—and (2) the differences

are not small by the standards whereby such things are measured.

The relationship between the masculine and consciousness is also portrayed,

symbolically, in the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid*. Ariel, the heroine, is quite feminine,

but she also has a strong spirit of independence. For this reason, she is her father's

favourite, although she also causes him the most trouble. Her father Triton is the king,

representing the known, culture and order (with a hint of the oppressive rule-giver and

tyrant). Because order is always opposed by chaos, Triton has an adversary, Ursula, a

tentacled octopus—a serpent, a gorgon, a hydra. Thus, Ursula is in the same archetypal

category as the dragon/queen Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (or the jealous older queen in

Snow White, Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*, the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*, Cruella de

Vil in *101 Dalmations*, Miss Medusa in *The Rescuers* and Mother Gothel in *Tangled*).

Ariel wants to kindle a romance with Prince Eric, whom she previously rescued from a

shipwreck. Ursula tricks Ariel into giving up her voice so that she can have three days as a

human being. Ursula knows full well, however, that a voiceless Ariel will not be able to

establish a relationship with the Prince. Without her capacity to speak—without the

Logos; without the Divine Word—she will remain underwater, unconscious, forever.

When Ariel fails to form a union with Prince Eric, Ursula steals her soul, and places it

in her large collection of shrivelled and warped semi-beings, well-protected by her

feminine graces. When King Triton shows up to demand the return of his daughter,

Ursula makes him a terrible offer: he can take Ariel's place. Of course, the elimination of

the Wise King (who represents, to say it again, the benevolent side of the patriarchy) has

been Ursula's nefarious plan all along. Ariel is released, but Triton is now reduced to a

pathetic shadow of his former self. More importantly, Ursula now has Triton's magic

trident, the source of his godlike power.

Fortunately for everyone concerned (except Ursula), Prince Eric returns, distracting the

evil queen of the underworld with a harpoon. This opens an opportunity for Ariel to

attack Ursula, who grows, in response, to monstrous proportions—in the same manner as

Maleficent, *Sleeping Beauty*'s evil queen. Ursula creates a huge storm, and raises a whole

navy of sunken ships from the ocean floor. As she prepares to kill Ariel, Eric

commandeers a wrecked ship, and rams her with its broken bowsprit. Triton and the

other captured souls are released. The rejuvenated Triton then transforms his daughter

into a human being, so she can remain with Eric. For a woman to become complete, such

stories claim, she must form a relationship with masculine consciousness and stand up to

the terrible world (which sometimes manifests itself, primarily, in the form of her too-

present mother). An actual man can help her do that, to some degree, but it is better for

everyone concerned when no one is too dependent.

One day, when I was a kid, I was out playing softball with some friends. The teams

were a mixture of boys and girls. We were all old enough so that the boys and girls were

starting to be interested in one another in an unfamiliar way. Status was becoming more

relevant and important. My friend Jake and I were about to come to blows, pushing each

other around near the pitching mound, when my mom walked by. She was a fair distance

away, about thirty yards, but I could immediately see by the change in her body language

that she knew what was going on. Of course, the other kids saw her as well. She walked

right by. I knew that hurt her. Part of her was worried that I would come home with a

bloody nose and a black eye. It would have been easy enough for her just to yell, “Hey,

you kids, quit that!” or even to come over and interfere. But she didn’t. A few years later,

when I was having teenage trouble with my dad, my mom said, “If it was too good at

home, you’d never leave.”

My mom is a tender-hearted person. She’s empathetic, and cooperative, and agreeable.

Sometimes she lets people push her around. When she went back to work after being at

home with her young kids, she found it challenging to stand up to the men. Sometimes

that made her resentful—something she also feels, sometimes, in relationship to my

father, who is strongly inclined to do what he wants, when he wants to. Despite all that,

she's no Oedipal mother. She fostered the independence of her children, even though

doing so was often hard on her. She did the right thing, even though it caused her

emotional distress.

Toughen Up, You Weasel

I spent one youthful summer on the prairie of central Saskatchewan working on a railway

I spent one youthful summer on the prairie of central Saskatchewan working on a railway

line crew. Every man in that all-male group was tested by the others during the first two

weeks or so of their hiring. Many of the other workers were Northern Cree Indians, quiet

guys for the most part, easygoing, until they drank too much, and the chips on their

shoulders started to show. They had been in and out of jail, as had most of their relatives.

They didn’t attach much shame to that, considering it just another part of the white

man’s system. It was also warm in jail in the winter, and the food was regular and

plentiful. I lent one of the Cree guys fifty bucks at one point. Instead of paying me back,

he offered me a pair of bookends, cut from some of the original rail laid across western

Canada, which I still own. That was better than the fifty bucks.

When a new guy first showed up, the other workers would inevitably provide him with

an insulting nickname. They called me Howdy-Doody, after I was accepted as a crew

member (something I am still slightly embarrassed to admit). When I asked the

originator why he chose that moniker, he said, wittily and absurdly, “Because you look

nothing like him.” Working men are often extremely funny, in a caustic, biting, insulting

manner (as discussed in Rule 9). They are always harassing each other, partly for

amusement, partly to score points in the eternal dominance battle between them, but also

partly to see what the other guy will do if he is subjected to social stress. It’s part of the

process of character evaluation, as well as camaraderie. When it works well (when

everybody gets, and gives as good as they get, and can give and take) it's a big part of

what allows men who work for a living to tolerate or even enjoy laying pipe and working

on oil rigs and lumberjacking and working in restaurant kitchens and all the other hot,

dirty, physically demanding and dangerous work that is still done almost totally by men.

Not too long after I started on the rail crew, my name was changed to Howdy. This was

a great improvement, as it had a good Western connotation, and was not obviously linked

to that stupid puppet. The next man hired was not so fortunate. He carried a fancy

lunchbucket, which was a mistake, as brown paper bags were the proper, non-pretentious

convention. It was a little too nice and too new. It looked like maybe his mother had

bought it (and packed it) for him. Thus, it became his name. Lunchbucket was not a

good-humored guy. He bitched about everything, and had a bad attitude. Everything was

someone else's fault. He was touchy, and none too quick on the draw.

Lunchbucket couldn’t accept his name, or settle into his job. He adopted an attitude of

condescending irritation when addressed, and reacted to the work in the same manner.

He was not fun to be around, and he couldn’t take a joke. That’s fatal, on a work crew.

After about three days of carrying on with his ill-humour and general air of hard-done-by

superiority, Lunchbucket started to experience harassment extending well beyond his

nickname. He would be peevishly working away on the line, surrounded by about seventy

men, spread out over a quarter mile. Suddenly a pebble would appear out of nowhere,

flying through the air, aimed at his hardhat. A direct hit would produce a thunking sound,

deeply satisfying to all the quietly attending onlookers. Even this failed to improve his

humour. So, the pebbles got larger. Lunchbucket would involve himself in something and

forget to pay attention. Then, “thunk!”—a well-aimed stone would nail him on the

noggin, producing a burst of irritated and ineffectual fury. Quiet amusement would ripple

down the rail line. After a few days of this, no wiser, and carrying a few bruises,

Lunchbucket vanished.

Men enforce a code of behaviour on each other, when working together. Do your work.

Pull your weight. Stay awake and pay attention. Don't whine or be touchy. Stand up for

your friends. Don't suck up and don't snitch. Don't be a slave to stupid rules. Don't, in

the immortal words of Arnold Schwarzenegger, be a girlie man. Don't be dependent. At

all. Ever. Period. The harassment that is part of acceptance on a working crew is a test:

are you tough, entertaining, competent and reliable? If not, go away. Simple as that. We

don't need to feel sorry for you. We don't want to put up with your narcissism, and we

don't want to do your work.

There was a famous advertisement in the form of a comic strip issued a few decades ago

by the bodybuilder Charles Atlas. It was titled "The Insult that Made a Man out of Mac"

and could be found in almost every comic book, most of which were read by boys. Mac,

the protagonist, is sitting on a beach blanket with an attractive young woman. A bully

runs by, and kicks sand in both their faces. Mac objects. The much larger man grabs him

by the arm and says, “Listen here. I’d smash your face …. Only you’re so skinny you

might dry up and blow away.” The bully departs. Mac says to the girl, “The big bully! I’ll

get even some day.” She adopts a provocative pose, and says, “Oh, don’t let it bother you,

little boy.” Mac goes home, considers his pathetic physique, and buys the Atlas program.

Soon, he has a new body. The next time he goes to the beach, he punches the bully in the

nose. The now-admiring girl clings to his arm. “Oh, Mac!” she says. “You’re a real man

after all.”

That ad is famous for a reason. It summarizes human sexual psychology in seven

straightforward panels. The too-weak young man is embarrassed and self-conscious, as he

should be. What good is he? He gets put down by other men and, worse, by desirable

women. Instead of drowning in resentment, and skulking off to his basement to play

video games in his underwear, covered with Cheetos dust, he presents himself with what

Alfred Adler, Freud's most practical colleague, called a "compensatory fantasy." 205 The

goal of such a fantasy is not so much wish-fulfillment, as illumination of a genuine path

forward. Mac takes serious note of his scarecrow-like build and decides that he should

develop a stronger body. More importantly, he puts his plan into action. He identifies

with the part of himself that could transcend his current state, and becomes the hero of

his own adventure. He goes back to the beach, and punches the bully in the nose. Mac

wins. So does his eventual girlfriend. So does everybody else.

It is to women's clear advantage that men do not happily put up with dependency

among themselves. Part of the reason that so many a working-class woman does not

marry, now, as we have alluded to, is because she does not want to look after a man,

struggling for employment, as well as her children. And fair enough. A woman should

look after her children—although that is not all she should do. And a man should look

after a woman and children—although that is not all he should do. But a woman should

not look after a man, because she must look after children, and a man should not be a

child. This means that he must not be dependent. This is one of the reasons that men

have little patience for dependent men. And let us not forget: wicked women may produce

dependent sons, may support and even marry dependent men, but awake and conscious

women want an awake and conscious partner.

If is for this reason that Nelson Muntz of *The Simpsons* is so necessary to the small social

group that surrounds Homer's antihero son, Bart. Without Nelson, King of the Bullies,

the school would soon be overrun by resentful, touchy Milhouses, narcissistic, intellectual

Martin Princes, soft, chocolate-gorging German children, and infantile Ralph Wiggums.

Muntz is a corrective, a tough, self-sufficient kid who uses his own capacity for contempt

to decide what line of immature and pathetic behaviour simply cannot be crossed. Part of

the genius of *The Simpsons* is its writers' refusal to simply write Nelson off as an

irredeemable bully. Abandoned by his worthless father, neglected, thankfully, by his

thoughtless slut of a mother, Nelson does pretty well, everything considered. He's even of

romantic interest to the thoroughly progressive Lisa, much to her dismay and confusion

(for much the same reasons that *Fifty Shades of Grey* became a worldwide phenomenon).

When softness and harmlessness become the only consciously acceptable virtues, then

hardness and dominance will start to exert an unconscious fascination. Partly what this

means for the future is that if men are pushed too hard to feminize, they will become

more and more interested in harsh, fascist political ideology. *Fight Club*, perhaps the most

fascist popular film made in recent years by Hollywood, with the possible exception of the

Iron Man series, provides a perfect example of such inevitable attraction. The populist

groundswell of support for Donald Trump in the US is part of the same process, as is (in

far more sinister form) the recent rise of far-right political parties even in such moderate

and liberal places as Holland, Sweden and Norway.

Men have to toughen up. Men demand it, and women want it, even though they may

not approve of the harsh and contemptuous attitude that is part and parcel of the socially

demanding process that fosters and then enforces that toughness. Some women don't like

losing their baby boys, so they keep them forever. Some women don't like men, and

would rather have a submissive mate, even if he is useless. This also provides them with

plenty to feel sorry for themselves about, as well. The pleasures of such self-pity should

not be underestimated.

Men toughen up by pushing themselves, and by pushing each other. When I was a

teenager, the boys were much more likely to get into car accidents than the girls (as they

still are). This was because they were out spinning donuts at night in icy parking lots.

They were drag racing and driving their cars over the roadless hills extending from the

nearby river up to the level land hundreds of feet higher. They were more likely to fight

physically, and to skip class, and to tell the teachers off, and to quit school because they

were tired of raising their hands for permission to go to the bathroom when they were big

and strong enough to work on the oil rigs. They were more likely to race their motorbikes

on frozen lakes in the winter. Like the skateboarders, and crane climbers, and free

runners, they were doing dangerous things, trying to make themselves useful. When this

process goes too far, boys (and men) drift into the antisocial behavior which is far more

prevalent in males than in females.206 That does not mean that every manifestation of

daring and courage is criminal.

When the boys were spinning donuts, they were also testing the limits of their cars,

their ability as drivers, and their capacity for control, in an out-of-control situation. When

they told off the teachers, they were pushing against authority, to see if there was any real

authority there—the kind that could be relied on, in principle, in a crisis. When they quit

school, they went to work as rig roughnecks when it was forty bloody degrees below zero.

It wasn't weakness that propelled so many out of the classroom, where a better future

arguably awaited. It was strength.

If they're healthy, women don't want boys. They want men. They want someone to

contend with; someone to grapple with. If they're tough, they want someone tougher. If

they're smart, they want someone smarter. They desire someone who brings to the table

something they can't already provide. This often makes it hard for tough, smart, attractive

women to find mates: there just aren't that many men around who can outclass them

enough to be considered desirable (who are higher, as one research publication put it, in

"income, education, self-confidence, intelligence, dominance and social position").207 The

spirit that interferes when boys are trying to become men is, therefore, no more friend to

woman than it is to man. It will object, just as vociferously and self-righteously ("you

can't do it, it's too dangerous") when little girls try to stand on their own two feet. It

negates consciousness. It's antihuman, desirous of failure, jealous, resentful and

destructive. No one truly on the side of humanity would ally him or herself with such a

thing. No one aiming at moving up would allow him or herself to become possessed by

such a thing. And if you think tough men are dangerous, wait until you see what weak

men are capable of.

Leave children alone when they are skateboarding.

R U L E 1 2

PET A CAT WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER ONE ON THE STREET

DOGS ARE OK TOO

I am going to start this chapter by stating directly that I own a dog, an American Eskimo,

one of the many variants of the basic spitz type. They were known as German spitzes

until the First World War made it verboten to admit that anything good could come from

Germany. American Eskimos are among the most beautiful of dogs, with a pointed,

classic wolf face, upright ears, a long thick coat, and a curly tail. They are also very

intelligent. Our dog, whose name is Sikko (which means “ice” in an Inuit language,

according to my daughter, who named him), learns tricks very rapidly, and can do so even

now that he’s old. I taught him a new stunt, recently, when he turned thirteen. He already

knew how to shake a paw, and to balance a treat on his nose. I taught him to do both at

the same time. However, it's not at all clear he enjoys it.

We bought Sikko for my daughter, Mikhaila, when she was about ten years old. He was

an unbearably cute pup. Small nose and ears, rounded face, big eyes, awkward movements

—these features automatically elicit caretaking behaviour from humans, male and female

alike.208 This was certainly the case with Mikhaila, who was also occupied with the care of

bearded dragons, gekkoes, ball pythons, chameleons, iguanas and a twenty-pound, thirty-

two-inch-long Flemish Giant rabbit named George, who nibbled on everything in the

house and frequently escaped (to the great consternation of those who then spied his

improbably large form in their tiny mid-city gardens). She had all these animals because

she was allergic to the more typical pets—excepting Sikko, who had the additional

advantage of being hypo-allergenic.

Sikko garnered fifty nicknames (we counted) which varied broadly in their emotional

tone, and reflected both the affection in which he was held and our occasional frustration

with his beastly habits. Scumdog was probably my favorite, but I also held Rathound,

Furball and Suck-dog in rather high esteem. The kids used Sneak and Squeak (sometimes

with an appended o) most frequently, but accompanied it with Snooky, Ugdog, and

Snorfalopogus (horrible though it is to admit). Snorbs is Mikhaila's current moniker of

choice. She uses it to greet him after a prolonged absence. For full effect, it must be

uttered in a high-pitched and surprised voice.

Sikko also happens to have his own Instagram hashtag: #JudgementalSikko.

I am describing my dog instead of writing directly about cats because I don't wish to

run afoul of a phenomenon known as "minimal group identification," discovered by the

social psychologist Henri Tajfel. 209 Tajfel brought his research subjects into his lab and

sat them down in front of a screen, onto which he flashed a number of dots. The subjects

were asked to estimate their quantity. Then he categorized his subjects as overestimators

vs underestimators, as well as accurate vs inaccurate, and put them into groups

corresponding to their performance. Then he asked them to divide money among the

members of all the groups.

Tajfel found that his subjects displayed a marked preference for their own group

members, rejecting an egalitarian distribution strategy and disproportionately rewarding

those with whom they now identified. Other researchers have assigned people to different

groups using ever more arbitrary strategies, such as flipping a coin. It didn't matter, even

when the subjects were informed of the way the groups were composed. People still

favoured the co-members of their personal group.

225

Tajfel's studies demonstrated two things: first, *that people are social*; second, *that people*

are antisocial. People are social because they like the members of their own group. People

are antisocial because they don't like the members of other groups. Exactly why this is so

has been the subject of continual debate. I think it might be a solution to a complex

problem of optimization. Such problems arise, for example, when two or more factors are

important, but none cannot be maximized without diminishing the others. A problem of

this sort emerges, for example, because of the antipathy between cooperation and

competition, both of which are socially and psychologically desirable. Cooperation is for

safety, security and companionship. Competition is for personal growth and status.

However, if a given group is too small, it has no power or prestige, and cannot fend off

other groups. In consequence, being one of its members is not that useful. If the group is

too large, however, the probability of climbing near or to the top declines. So, it becomes

too hard to get ahead. Perhaps people identify with groups at the flip of a coin because

they deeply want to organize themselves, protect themselves, and still have some

reasonable probability of climbing the dominance hierarchy. Then they favour their own

group, because favouring it helps it thrive—and climbing something that is failing is not a

useful strategy.

In any case, it is because of Tajfel's minimal-conditions discovery that I began this cat-

related chapter with a description of my dog. Otherwise, the mere mention of a cat in the

title would be enough to turn many dog people against me, just because I didn't include

canines in the group of entities that should be petted. Since I also like dogs, there is no

reason for me to suffer such a fate. So, if you like to pet dogs when you meet them on the

street, don't feel obliged to hate me. Rest assured, instead, that this is also an activity of

which I approve. I would also like to apologize to all the cat people who now feel slighted,

because they were hoping for a cat story but had to read all this dog-related material.

Perhaps they might be satisfied by some assurance that cats do illustrate the point I want

to make better, and that I will eventually discuss them. First, however, to other things.

Suffering and the Limitations of Being

The idea that life is suffering is a tenet, in one form or another, of every major religious

doctrine, as we have already discussed. Buddhists state it directly. Christians illustrate it

with the cross. Jews commemorate the suffering endured over centuries. Such reasoning

universally characterizes the great creeds, because human beings are intrinsically fragile.

We can be damaged, even broken, emotionally and physically, and we are all subject to

the depredations of aging and loss. This is a dismal set of facts, and it is reasonable to

wonder how we can expect to thrive and be happy (or even to want to exist, sometimes)

under such conditions.

I was speaking recently with a client whose husband had been engaging in a successful

battle with cancer for an agonizing period of five years. They had both held up remarkably

and courageously over this period. However, he fell prey to the tendency of that dread

condition to metastasize and, in consequence, had been given very little time to live. It is

perhaps hardest to hear terrible news like this when you are still in the fragile post-

recovery state that occurs after dealing successfully with previous bad news. Tragedy at

such a time seems particularly unfair. It is the sort of thing that can make you distrust

even hope itself. It's frequently sufficient to cause genuine trauma. My client and I

discussed a number of issues, some philosophical and abstract, some more concrete. I

shared with her some of the thoughts that I had developed about the whys and

wherefores of human vulnerability.

When my son, Julian, was about three, he was particularly cute. He's twenty years older

than that now, but still quite cute (a compliment I'm sure he'll particularly enjoy

reading). Because of him, I thought a lot about the fragility of small children. A three-

year-old is easily damaged. Dogs can bite him. Cars can hit him. Mean kids can push him

over. He can get sick (and sometimes did). Julian was prone to high fevers and the

delirium they sometimes produce. Sometimes I had to take him into the shower with me

and cool him off when he was hallucinating, or even fighting with me, in his feverish

state. There are few things that make it harder to accept the fundamental limitations of

human existence than a sick child.

Mikhaila, a year and a few months older than Julian, also had her problems. When she

was two, I would lift her up on my shoulders and carry her around. Kids enjoy that.

Afterwards, however, when I put her feet back on the ground, she would sit down and

cry. So, I stopped doing it. That seemed to be the end of the problem—with a seemingly

minor exception. My wife, Tammy, told me that something was wrong with Mikhaila's

gait. I couldn't see it. Tammy thought it might be related to her reaction to being carried

on my shoulders.

Mikhaila was a sunny child and very easy to get along with. One day when she was

about fourteen months old I took her along with Tammy and her grandparents to Cape

Cod, when we lived in Boston. When we got there, Tammy and her mom and dad walked

ahead, and left me with Mikhaila in the car. We were in the front seat. She was lying there

in the sun, babbling away. I leaned over to hear what she was saying.

"Happy, happy, happy, happy, happy."

That's what she was like.

When she turned six, however, she started to get mopey. It was hard to get her out of

bed in the morning. She put on her clothes very slowly. When we walked somewhere, she

lagged behind. She complained that her feet hurt and that her shoes didn't fit. We bought

her ten different pairs, but it didn't help. She went to school, and held her head up, and

behaved properly. But when she came home, and saw her Mom, she would break into

tears.

We had recently moved from Boston to Toronto, and attributed these changes to the

stress of the move. But it didn't get better. Mikhaila began to walk up and down stairs

one step at a time. She began to move like someone much older. She complained if you

held her hand. (One time, much later, she asked me, "Dad, when you played 'this little

piggy,' with me when I was little, was it supposed to hurt?" Things you learn too late …).

A physician at our local medical clinic told us, "Sometimes children have growing

pains. They're normal. But you could think about taking her to see a physiotherapist." So,

we did. The physiotherapist tried to rotate Mikhaila's heel. It didn't move. That was not

good. The physio told us, "Your daughter has juvenile rheumatoid arthritis." This was not

what we wanted to hear. We did not like that physiotherapist. We went back to the

medical clinic. Another physician there told us to take Mikhaila to the Hospital for Sick

Children. The doctor said, “Take her to the emergency room. That way, you will be able

to see a rheumatologist quickly.” Mikhaila had arthritis, all right. The physio, bearer of

unwelcome news, was correct. Thirty-seven affected joints. Severe polyarticular juvenile

idiopathic arthritis (JIA). Cause? Unknown. Prognosis? Multiple early joint replacements.

What sort of God would make a world where such a thing could happen, at all?—much

less to an innocent and happy little girl? It’s a question of absolutely fundamental import,

for believer and non-believer alike. It’s an issue addressed (as are so many difficult

matters) in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the great novel by Dostoevsky we began to discuss in

Rule 7. Dostoevsky expresses his doubts about the propriety of Being through the

character of Ivan who, if you remember, is the articulate, handsome, sophisticated brother

(and greatest adversary) of the monastic novitiate Alyosha. “It’s not God I don’t accept.

Understand this," says Ivan. "I do not accept the world that He created, this world of

God's, and cannot agree with it."

227

Ivan tells Alyosha a story about a small girl whose parents punished her by locking her

in a freezing outhouse overnight (a story Dostoevsky culled from a newspaper of the

time). "Can you just see those two snoozing away while their daughter was crying all

night?" says Ivan. "And imagine this little child: unable to understand what was

happening to her, beating her frozen little chest and crying meek little tears, begging

'gentle Jesus' to get her out of that horrible place! … Alyosha: if you were somehow

promised that the world could finally have complete and total peace—but only on the

condition that you tortured one little child to death—say, that girl who was freezing in

the outhouse … would you do it?" Alyosha demurs. "No, I would not," he says, softly. 210

He would not do what God seems to freely allow.

I had realized something relevant to this, years before, about three-year-old Julian

(remember him? :)). I thought, “I love my son. He’s three, and cute and little and

comical. But I am also afraid for him, because he could be hurt. If I had the power to

change that, what might I do?” I thought, “He could be twenty feet tall instead of forty

inches. Nobody could push him over then. He could be made of titanium, instead of flesh

and bone. Then, if some brat bounced a toy truck off his noggin, he wouldn’t care. He

could have a computer-enhanced brain. And even if he was damaged, somehow, his parts

could be immediately replaced. Problem solved!” But no—not problem solved—and not

just because such things are currently impossible. Artificially fortifying Julian would have

been the same as destroying him. Instead of his little three-year-old self, he would be a

cold, steel-hard robot. That wouldn’t be Julian. It would be a monster. I came to realize

through such thoughts that what can be truly loved about a person is inseparable from

their limitations. Julian wouldn’t have been little and cute and lovable if he wasn’t also

prone to illness, and loss, and pain, and anxiety. Since I loved him a lot, I decided that he

was all right the way he was, despite his fragility.

It's been harder with my daughter. As her disease progressed, I began to piggy-back her

around (not on my shoulders) when we went for walks. She started taking oral naproxen

and methotrexate, the latter a powerful chemotherapy agent. She had a number of cortisol

injections (wrists, shoulders, ankles, elbows, knees, hips, fingers, toes and tendons), all

under general anaesthetic. This helped temporarily, but her decline continued. One day

Tammy took Mikhaila to the zoo. She pushed her around in a wheelchair.

That was not a good day.

Her rheumatologist suggested prednisone, a corticosteroid, long used to fight

inflammation. But prednisone has many side effects, not the least of which is severe facial

swelling. It wasn't clear that this was better than the arthritis, not for a little girl.

Fortunately, if that is the right word, the rheumatologist told us of a new drug. It had

been used previously, but only on adults. So Mikhaila became the first Canadian child to

receive etanercept, a "biological" specifically designed for autoimmune diseases. Tammy

accidentally administered ten times the recommended dose the first few injections. Poof!

Mikhaila was fixed. A few weeks after the trip to the zoo, she was zipping around, playing

little league soccer. Tammy spent all summer just watching her run.

We wanted Mikhaila to control as much of her life as she could. She had always been

strongly motivated by money. One day we found her outside, surrounded by the books of

her early childhood, selling them to passersby. I sat her down one evening and told her

that I would give her fifty dollars if she could do the injection herself. She was eight. She

struggled for thirty-five minutes, holding the needle close to her thigh. Then she did it.

Next time I paid her twenty dollars, but only gave her ten minutes. Then it was ten

dollars, and five minutes. We stayed at ten for quite a while. It was a bargain.

After a few years, Mikhaila became completely symptom-free. The rheumatologist

suggested that we start weaning her off her medications. Some children grow out of JIA

when they hit puberty. No one knows why. She began to take methotrexate in pill form,

instead of injecting it. Things were good for four years. Then, one day, her elbow started

to ache. We took her back to the hospital. “You only have one actively arthritic joint,”

said the rheumatologist’s assistant. It wasn’t “only.” Two isn’t much more than one, but

one is a lot more than zero. One meant she hadn’t grown out of her arthritis, despite the

hiatus. The news demolished her for a month, but she was still in dance class and playing

ball games with her friends on the street in front of our house.

The rheumatologist had some more unpleasant things to say the next September, when

Mikhaila started grade eleven. An MRI revealed joint deterioration at the hip. She told

Mikhaila, “Your hip will have to be replaced before you turn thirty.” Perhaps the damage

had been done, before the etanercept worked its miracle? We didn’t know. It was

ominous news. One day, a few weeks after, Mikhaila was playing ball hockey in her high

school gym. Her hip locked up. She had to hobble off the court. It started to hurt more

and more. The rheumatologist said, “Some of your femur appears to be dead. You don’t

need a hip replacement when you’re thirty. You need one now.”

As I sat with my client—as she discussed her husband's advancing illness—we

discussed the fragility of life, the catastrophe of existence, and the sense of nihilism

evoked by the spectre of death. I started with my thoughts about my son. She had asked,

like everyone in her situation, "Why my husband? Why me? Why this?" My realization of

the tight interlinking between vulnerability and Being was the best answer I had for her. I

told her an old Jewish story, which I believe is part of the commentary on the Torah. It

begins with a question, structured like a Zen koan. *Imagine a Being who is omniscient,*

omnipresent, and omnipotent. What does such a Being lack? 211 The answer? *Limitation*.

If you are already everything, everywhere, always, there is nowhere to go and nothing to

be. Everything that could be already is, and everything that could happen already has. And

it is for this reason, so the story goes, that God created man. No limitation, no story. No

story, no Being. That idea has helped me deal with the terrible fragility of Being. It helped

my client, too. I don't want to overstate the significance of this. I don't want to claim that

this somehow makes it all OK. She still faced the cancer afflicting her husband, just as I

still faced my daughter's terrible illness. But there's something to be said for recognizing

that existence and limitation are inextricably linked.

Though thirty spokes may form the wheel,

it is the hole within the hub

which gives the wheel utility.

It is not the clay the potter throws,

which gives the pot its usefulness,

but the space within the shape,

from which the pot is made.

Without a door, the room cannot be entered,

and without its windows it is dark

Such is the utility of non-existence. 212

A realization of this sort emerged more recently, in the pop culture world, during the

evolution of the DC Comics cultural icon Superman. Superman was created in 1938 by

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. In the beginning, he could move cars, trains and even ships.

He could run faster than a locomotive. He could "leap over tall buildings in a single

bound.” As he developed over the next four decades, however, Superman’s power began

to expand. By the late sixties, he could fly faster than light. He had super-hearing and X-

ray vision. He could blast heat-rays from his eyes. He could freeze objects and generate

hurricanes with his breath. He could move entire planets. Nuclear blasts didn’t faze him.

And, if he did get hurt, somehow, he would immediately heal. Superman became

invulnerable.

Then a strange thing happened. He got boring. The more amazing his abilities became,

the harder it was to think up interesting things for him to do. DC first overcame this

problem in the 1940s. Superman became vulnerable to the radiation produced by

kryptonite, a material remnant of his shattered home planet. Eventually, more than two

dozen variants emerged. Green kryptonite weakened Superman. In sufficient dosage, it

could even kill him. Red caused him to behave strangely. Red-green caused him to mutate

(he once grew a third eye in the back of his head).

Other techniques were necessary to keep Superman's story compelling. In 1976, he was

scheduled to battle Spiderman. It was the first superhero cross-over between Stan Lee's

upstart Marvel Comics, with its less idealized characters, and DC, the owner of Superman

and Batman. But Marvel had to augment Spiderman's powers for the battle to remain

plausible. That broke the rules of the game. Spiderman is Spiderman because he has the

powers of a spider. If he is suddenly granted any old power, he's not Spiderman. The plot

falls apart.

By the 1980s, Superman was suffering from terminal deus ex machina—a Latin term

meaning "god from a machine." The term described the rescue of the imperilled hero in

ancient Greek and Romans plays by the sudden and miraculous appearance of an all-

powerful god. In badly written stories, to this very day, a character in trouble can be saved

or a failing plot redeemed by a bit of implausible magic or other chicanery not in keeping

with the reader's reasonable expectations. Sometimes Marvel Comics, for example, saves

a failing story in exactly this manner. Lifeguard, for example, is an X-Man character who

can develop whatever power is necessary to save a life. He's very handy to have around.

Other examples abound in popular culture. At the end of Stephen King's *The Stand*, for

example (spoiler alert), God Himself destroys the novel's evil characters. The entire ninth

season (1985–86) of the primetime soap *Dallas* was later revealed as a dream. Fans object

to such things, and rightly so. They've been ripped off. People following a story are

willing to suspend disbelief as long as the limitations making the story possible are

coherent and consistent. Writers, for their part, agree to abide by their initial decisions.

When writers cheat, fans get annoyed. They want to toss the book in the fireplace, and

throw a brick through the TV.

And that became Superman's problem: he developed powers so extreme that he could

"deus" himself out of anything, at any time. In consequence, in the 1980s, the franchise

nearly died. Artist-writer John Byrne successfully rebooted it, rewriting Superman,

retaining his biography, but depriving him of many of his new powers. He could no longer

lift planets, or shrug off an H-bomb. He also became dependent on the sun for his power,

like a reverse vampire. He gained some reasonable limitations. A superhero who can do

anything turns out to be no hero at all. He's nothing specific, so he's nothing. He has

nothing to strive against, so he can't be admirable. *Being of any reasonable sort appears to*

require limitation. Perhaps this is because Being requires Becoming, perhaps, as well as

mere static existence—and to become is to become something more, or at least

something different. That is only possible for something limited.

Fair enough.

But what about the suffering caused by such limits? Perhaps the limits required by

Being are so extreme that the whole project should just be scrapped. Dostoevsky

expresses this idea very clearly in the voice of the protagonist of *Notes from Underground*:

"So you see, you can say anything about world history—anything and everything that the

most morbid imagination can think up. Except one thing, that is. It cannot be said that

world history is reasonable. The word sticks in one's throat. "213 Goethe's

Mephistopheles, the adversary of Being, announces his opposition explicitly to God's

creation in *Faust*, as we have seen. Years later, Goethe wrote *Faust, Part II*. He has the

Devil repeat his credo, in a slightly different form, just to hammer home the point:214

Gone, to sheer Nothing, past with null made one!

What matters our creative endless toil,

When, at a snatch, oblivion ends the coil?

" It is by-gone" —How shall this riddle run?

230

As good as if things never had begun,

Yet circle back, existence to possess:

I'd rather have Eternal Emptiness.

Anyone can understand such words, when a dream collapses, a marriage ends, or a family

member is struck down by a devastating disease. How can reality be structured so

unbearably? How can this be?

Perhaps, as the Columbine boys suggested (see Rule 6), it would be better not to be at

all. Perhaps it would be even better if there was no Being at all. But people who come to

the former conclusion are flirting with suicide, and those who come to the latter with

something worse, something truly monstrous. They're consorting with the idea of the

destruction of everything. They are toying with genocide—and worse. Even the darkest

regions have still darker corners. And what is truly horrifying is that such conclusions are

understandable, maybe even inevitable—although not inevitably acted upon. What is a

reasonable person to think when faced, for example, with a suffering child? Is it not

precisely the reasonable person, the compassionate person, who would find such

thoughts occupying his mind? How could a good God allow such a world as this to exist?

Logical they might be. Understandable, they might be. But there is a terrible catch to

such conclusions. Acts undertaken in keeping with them (if not the thoughts themselves)

inevitably serve to make a bad situation even worse. Hating life, despising life—even for

the genuine pain that life inflicts—merely serves to make life itself worse, unbearably

worse. There is no genuine protest in that. There is no goodness in that, only the desire

to produce suffering, for the sake of suffering. That is the very essence of evil. People who

come to that kind of thinking are one step from total mayhem. Sometimes they merely

lack the tools. Sometimes, like Stalin, they have their finger on the nuclear button.

But is there any coherent alternative, given the self-evident horrors of existence? Can

Being itself, with its malarial mosquitoes, child soldiers and degenerative neurological

diseases, truly be justified? I'm not sure I could have formulated a proper answer to such

a question in the nineteenth century, before the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth were

monstrously perpetrated on millions of people. I don't know that it's possible to

understand why such doubts are morally impermissible without the fact of the Holocaust

and the Stalinist purges and Mao's catastrophic Great Leap Forward.215And I also don't

think it is possible to answer the question by *thinking*. Thinking leads inexorably to the

abyss. It did not work for Tolstoy. It might not even have worked for Nietzsche, who

arguably thought more clearly about such things than anyone in history. But if it is not

thinking that can be relied upon in the direst of situations, what is left? Thought, after all,

is the highest of human achievements, is it not?

Perhaps not.

Something supersedes thinking, despite its truly awesome power. When existence

reveals itself as existentially intolerable, thinking collapses in on itself. In such situations

—in the depths—it's *noticing*, not thinking, that does the trick. Perhaps you might start by

noticing this: when you love someone, *it's not despite their limitations. It's because of their*

limitations. Of course, it's complicated. You don't have to be in love with every

shortcoming, and merely accept. You shouldn't stop trying to make life better, or let

suffering just be. But there appear to be limits on the path to improvement beyond which

we might not want to go, lest we sacrifice our humanity itself. Of course, it's one thing to

say, "Being requires limitation," and then to go about happily, when the sun is shining

and your father is free of Alzheimer's disease and your kids are healthy and your marriage

happy. But when things go wrong?

Disintegration and Pain

Mikhaila stayed awake many nights when she was in pain. When her grandfather came to

Mikhaila stayed awake many nights when she was in pain. When her grandfather came to

visit, he gave her a few of his Tylenol 3s, which contain codeine. Then she could sleep.

But not for long. Our rheumatologist, instrumental in producing Mikhaila's remission, hit

the limit of her courage when dealing with our child's pain. She had once prescribed

opiates to a young girl, who became addicted. She swore never to do so again. She said,

"Have you tried ibuprofen?" Mikhaila learned then that doctors don't know everything.

Ibuprofen for her was a crumb of bread for a starving man.

We talked to a new doctor. He listened carefully. Then he helped Mikhaila. First, he

prescribed T3s, the same medication her grandfather had briefly shared. This was brave.

Physicians face a lot of pressure to avoid the prescription of opiates—not least to children.

But opiates *work*. Soon, however, the Tylenol was insufficient. She started taking

oxycontin, an opioid known pejoratively as hillbilly heroin. This controlled her pain, but

produced other problems. Tammy took Mikhaila out for lunch a week after the

prescription started. She could have been drunk. Her speech was slurred. Her head

nodded. This was not good.

My sister-in-law is a palliative care nurse. She thought we could add Ritalin, an

amphetamine often used for hyperactive kids, to the oxycontin. The Ritalin restored

Mikhaila's alertness and had some pain-suppressing qualities of its own (this is a very a

good thing to know if you are ever faced with someone's intractable suffering). But her

pain became increasingly excruciating. She started to fall. Then her hip seized up on her

again, this time in the subway on a day when the escalator was not working. Her

boyfriend carried her up the stairs. She took a cab home. The subway was no longer a

reliable form of transportation. That March we bought Mikhaila a 50cc motor scooter. It

was dangerous to let her ride it. It was also dangerous for her to lack all freedom. We

chose the former danger. She passed her learner's exam, which allowed her to pilot the

vehicle during the day. She was given a few months to progress towards her permanent

licence.

In May her hip was replaced. The surgeon was even able to adjust for a pre-existent half

centimetre difference in leg length. The bone hadn't died, either. That was only a shadow

on the x-ray. Her aunt and her grandparents came to see her. We had some better days.

Immediately after the surgery, however, Mikhaila was placed in an adult rehabilitation

centre. She was the youngest person in the place, by about sixty years. Her aged

roommate, very neurotic, wouldn't allow the lights to be off, even at night. The old

woman couldn't make it to the toilet and had to use a bedpan. She couldn't stand to have

the door to her room closed. But it was right beside the nurses' station, with its continual

alarm bells and loud conversations. There was no sleeping there, where sleeping was

required. No visitors were allowed after 7 p.m. The physio—the very reason for her

placement—was on vacation. The only person who helped her was the janitor, who

volunteered to move her to a multi-bed ward when she told the on-duty nurse that she

couldn't sleep. This was the same nurse who had laughed when she'd found out which

room Mikhaila had been assigned to.

She was supposed to be there for six weeks. She was there three days. When the

vacationing physio returned, Mikhaila climbed the rehab-centre stairs and immediately

mastered her additional required exercises. While she was doing that, we outfitted our

home with the necessary handrails. Then we took her home. All that pain and surgery—

she handled that fine. The appalling rehab centre? That produced post-traumatic stress

symptoms.

Mikhaila enrolled in a full-fledged motorcycle course in June, so she could continue

legally using her scooter. We were all terrified by this necessity. What if she fell? What if

she had an accident? On the first day, Mikhaila trained on a real motorcycle. It was heavy.

She dropped it several times. She saw another beginning rider tumble and roll across the

parking lot where the course was held. On the morning of the second day of the course,

she was afraid to return. She didn't want to leave her bed. We talked for a good while,

and jointly decided that she should at least drive back with Tammy to the site where the

training took place. If she couldn't manage it, she could stay in the car until the course

finished. En route, her courage returned. When she received her certificate, everyone else

enrolled stood and applauded.

Then her right ankle disintegrated. Her doctors wanted to fuse the large affected bones

into one piece. But that would have caused the other, smaller bones in her foot—now

facing additional pressure—to deteriorate. That's not so intolerable, perhaps, when you're

eighty (although it's no picnic then either). But it's no solution when you're in your

teens. We insisted upon an artificial replacement, although the technology was new.

There was a three year-waiting list. This was simply not manageable. The damaged ankle

produced much more pain than her previously failing hip. One bad night she became

erratic and illogical. I couldn't calm her down. I knew she was at her breaking point. To

call that stressful is to say almost nothing.

We spent weeks and then months desperately investigating all sorts of replacement

devices, trying to assess their suitability. We looked everywhere for quicker surgery:

India, China, Spain, the UK, Costa Rica, Florida. We contacted the Ontario Provincial

Ministry of Health. They were very helpful. They located a specialist across the country, in

Vancouver. Mikhaila's ankle was replaced in November. Post-surgery, she was in absolute

agony. Her foot was mispositioned. The cast was compressing skin against bone. The

clinic was unwilling to give her enough oxycontin to control her pain. She had built up a

high level of tolerance because of her previous use.

When she returned home, in less pain, Mikhaila started to taper off the opiates. She

hated oxycontin, despite its evident utility. She said it turned her life grey. Perhaps that

was a good thing, under the circumstances. She stopped using it as soon as possible. She

suffered through withdrawal for months, with night sweating and formication (the

sensation of ants crawling upside down under her skin). She became unable to experience

any pleasure. That was another effect of opiate withdrawal.

During much of this period, we were overwhelmed. The demands of everyday life don't

stop, just because you have been laid low by a catastrophe. Everything that you always do

still has to be done. So how do you manage? Here are some things we learned:

Set aside some time to talk and to think about the illness or other crisis and how it

should be managed every day. *Do not* talk or think about it otherwise. If you do not limit

its effect, you will become exhausted, and everything will spiral into the ground. This is

not helpful. Conserve your strength. You're in a war, not a battle, and a war is composed

of many battles. You must stay functional through all of them. When worries associated

with the crisis arise at other times, remind yourself that you will think them through,

during the scheduled period. This usually works. The parts of your brain that generate

anxiety are more interested in the fact that there is a plan than in the details of the plan.

Don't schedule your time to think in the evening or at night. Then you won't be able to

sleep. If you can't sleep, then everything will go rapidly downhill.

Shift the unit of time you use to frame your life. When the sun is shining, and times are

good, and the crops are bountiful, you can make your plans for the next month, and the

next year, and the next five years. You can even dream a decade ahead. But you can't do

that when your leg is clamped firmly in a crocodile's jaws. "Sufficient unto the day are the

evils thereof"—that is Matthew 6:34. It is often interpreted as "live in the present,

without a care for tomorrow." This is not what it means. That injunction must be

interpreted in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, of which it is an integral part.

That sermon distills the ten "Thou-shalt-nots" of the Commandments of Moses into a

single prescriptive "Thou shalt." Christ enjoins His followers to place faith in God's

Heavenly Kingdom, and the truth. That's a conscious decision to presume the primary

goodness of Being. That's an act of courage. Aim high, like Pinocchio's Geppetto. Wish

upon a star, and then act properly, in accordance with that aim. Once you are aligned with

the heavens, you can concentrate on the day. Be careful. Put the things you can control in

order. Repair what is in disorder, and make what is already good better. It is possible that

you can manage, if you are careful. People are very tough. People can survive through

much pain and loss. But to persevere they must see the good in Being. If they lose that,

they are truly lost.

Dogs, Again—But Finally, Cats

Dogs are like people. They are the friends and allies of human beings. They are social,

hierarchical, and domesticated. They are happy at the bottom of the family pyramid. They

pay for the attention they receive with loyalty, admiration, and love. Dogs are great.

Cats, however, are their own creatures. They aren't social or hierarchical (except in

passing). They are only semi-domesticated. They don't do tricks. They are friendly on

their own terms. Dogs have been tamed, but cats have made a decision. They appear

willing to interact with people, for some strange reasons of their own. To me, cats are a

manifestation of nature, of Being, in an almost pure form. Furthermore, they are a form of

Being that looks at human beings and approves.

When you meet a cat on a street, many things can happen. If I see a cat at a distance,

for example, the evil part of me wants to startle it with a loud pfft! sound—front teeth

over bottom lip. That will make a nervous cat puff up its fur and stand sideways so it

looks larger. Maybe I shouldn't laugh at cats, but it's hard to resist. The fact that they can

be startled is one of the best things about them (along with the fact that they are instantly

disgruntled and embarrassed by their overreaction). But when I have myself under proper

control, I'll bend down, and call the cat over, so I can pet it. Sometimes, it will run away.

Sometimes, it will ignore me completely, because it's a cat. But sometimes the cat will

come over to me, push its head against my waiting hand, and be pleased about it.

Sometimes it will even roll over, and arch its back against the dusty concrete (although

cats positioned in that manner will often bite and claw even a friendly hand).

Across the street on which I live is a cat named Ginger. Ginger is a Siamese, a beautiful

cat, very calm and self-possessed. She is low in the Big Five personality trait of

neuroticism, which is an index of anxiety, fear and emotional pain. Ginger is not at all

bothered by dogs. Our dog, Sikko, is her friend. Sometimes when you call her—

sometimes of her own accord—Ginger will trot across the street, tail held high, with a

little kink at the end. Then she will roll on her back in front of Sikko, who wags his tail

happily as a consequence. Afterward, if she feels like it, she might come visit you, for a

half a minute. It's a nice break. It's a little extra light, on a good day, and a tiny respite, on

a bad day.

If you pay careful attention, even on a bad day, you may be fortunate enough to be

confronted with small opportunities of just that sort. Maybe you will see a little girl

dancing on the street because she is all dressed up in a ballet costume. Maybe you will

have a particularly good cup of coffee in a café that cares about their customers. Maybe

you can steal ten or twenty minutes to do some little ridiculous thing that distracts you or

reminds you that you can laugh at the absurdity of existence. Personally, I like to watch a

Simpsons episode at 1.5 times regular speed: all the laughs; two-thirds the time.

And maybe when you are going for a walk and your head is spinning a cat will show up

and if you pay attention to it then you will get a reminder for just fifteen seconds that the

wonder of Being might make up for the ineradicable suffering that accompanies it.

Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street.

234

P.S. Soon after I wrote this chapter, Mikhaila's surgeon told her that her artificial ankle

would have to be removed, and her ankle fused. Amputation waited down that road. She

had been in pain for eight years, since the replacement surgery, and her mobility

remained significantly impaired, although both were much better than before. Four days

later she happened upon a new physiotherapist. He was a large, powerful, attentive

person. He had specialized in ankle treatment in the UK, in London. He placed his hands

around her ankle and compressed it for forty seconds, while Mikhaila moved her foot back

and forth. A mispositioned bone slipped back where it belonged. Her pain disappeared.

She never cries in front of medical personnel, but she burst into tears. Her knee

straightened up. Now she can walk long distances, and traipse around in her bare feet.

The calf muscle on her damaged leg is growing back. She has much more flexion in the

artificial joint. This year, she got married and had a baby girl, Elizabeth, named after my

wife’s departed mother.

Things are good.

For now.

Coda

WHAT SHALL I DO WITH MY NEWFOUND PEN OF LIGHT?

In late 2016 I travelled to northern California to meet a friend and business associate. We

spent an evening together thinking and talking. At one point he took a pen from his

jacket and took a few notes. It was LED-equipped and beamed light out its tip, so that

writing in the dark was made easier. “Just another gadget,” I thought. Later, however, in a

more metaphorical frame of mind, I was struck quite deeply by the idea of a pen of light.

There was something symbolic about it, something metaphysical. We’re all in the dark,

after all, much of the time. We could all use something written with light to guide us

along our way. I told him I wanted to do some writing, while we sat and conversed, and I

asked him if he would give me the pen, as a gift. When he handed it over, I found myself

inordinately pleased. Now I could write illuminated words in the darkness! Obviously, it

was important to do such a thing properly. So I said to myself, in all seriousness, “What

shall I do with my newfound pen of light?” There are two verses in the New Testament

that pertain to such things. I’ve thought about them a lot:

Ask, and it shall given to you; Seek, and ye shall find; Knock, and it shall be open unto you: For everyone who

asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened (Matthew 7:7-7:8)

At first glance, this seems like nothing but a testament to the magic of prayer, in the

sense of entreating God to grant favours. But God, whatever or whoever He may be, is no

simple granter of wishes. When tempted by the Devil himself, in the desert —as we saw in

Rule 7 (Pursue what is meaningful [not what is expedient])—even Christ Himself was

not willing to call upon his Father for a favour; furthermore, every day, the prayers of

desperate people go unanswered. But maybe this is because the questions they contain

are not phrased in the proper manner. Perhaps it's not reasonable to ask God to break the

rules of physics every time we fall by the wayside or make a serious error. Perhaps, in

such times, you can't put the cart before the horse and simply wish for your problem to

be solved in some magical manner. Perhaps you could ask, instead, what you might have

to do right now to increase your resolve, buttress your character, and find the strength to

go on. Perhaps you could instead ask to see the truth.

On many occasions in our nearly thirty years of marriage my wife and I have had a

disagreement—sometimes a deep disagreement. Our unity appeared to be broken, at

some unknowably profound level, and we were not able to easily resolve the rupture by

talking. We became trapped, instead, in emotional, angry and anxious argument. We

agreed that when such circumstances arose we would separate, briefly: she to one room,

me to another. This was often quite difficult, because it is hard to disengage in the heat of

an argument, when anger generates the desire to defeat and win. But it seemed better

than risking the consequences of a dispute that threatened to spiral out of control.

Alone, trying to calm down, we would each ask ourselves the same single question:

What had we each done to contribute to the situation we were arguing about? However small,

however distant … we had each made some error. Then we would reunite, and share the results

of our questioning: *Here's how I was wrong ….*

The problem with asking yourself such a question is that you must truly want the

answer. And the problem with doing that is that *you won't like the answer*. When you are

arguing with someone, you want to be right, and you want the other person to be wrong.

Then it’s them that has to sacrifice something and change, not you, and that’s much

preferable. If it’s you that’s wrong and you that must change, then you have to reconsider

237

yourself—your memories of the past, your manner of being in the present, and your plans

for the future. Then you must resolve to improve and figure out how to do that. Then you

actually have to do it. That’s exhausting. It takes repeated practice, to instantiate the new

perceptions and make the new actions habitual. It’s much easier just not to realize, admit

and engage. It’s much easier to turn your attention away from the truth and remain

wilfully blind.

But it’s at such a point that you must decide whether you want to be right or you want

to have peace.216 You must decide whether to insist upon the absolute correctness of your

view, or to listen and negotiate. You don’t get peace by being right. You just get to be

right, while your partner gets to be wrong—defeated and wrong. Do that ten thousand

times and your marriage will be over (or you will wish it was). To choose the alternative

—to seek peace—you have to decide that you want the answer, more than you want to be

right. That's the way out of the prison of your stubborn preconceptions. That's the

prerequisite for negotiation. That's to truly abide by principle of Rule 2 (Treat yourself

like someone you are responsible for helping).

My wife and I learned that if you ask yourself such a question, and you genuinely desire

the answer (no matter how disgraceful and terrible and shameful), then a memory of

something you did that was stupid and wrong at some point in the generally not-distant-

enough past will arise from the depths of your mind. Then you can go back to your

partner and reveal why you're an idiot, and apologize (sincerely) and that person can do

the same for you, and then apologize (sincerely), and then you two idiots will be able to

talk again. Perhaps that is true prayer: the question, "What have I done wrong, and what

can I do now to set things at least a little bit more right?" But your heart must be open to

the terrible truth. You must be receptive to that which you do not want to hear. When

you decide to learn about your faults, so that they can be rectified, you open a line of

communication with the source of all revelatory thought. Maybe that's the same thing as

consulting your conscience. Maybe that's the same thing, in some manner, as a discussion

with God.

It was in that spirit, with some paper in front of me, that I asked my question: *What*

shall I do with my newfound pen of light? I asked, as if I truly wanted the answer. I waited for

a reply. I was holding a conversation between two different elements of myself. I was

genuinely thinking—or listening, in the sense described in Rule 9 (Assume that the

person you are listening to might know something you don't). That rule can apply as

much to yourself as to others. It was me, of course, who asked the question—and it was

me, of course, who replied. But those two me's were not the same. I did not know what

the answer would be. I was waiting for it to appear in the theatre of my imagination. I was

waiting for the words to spring out of the void. How can a person think up something

that surprises him? How can he already not know what he thinks? Where do new

thoughts come from? Who or what thinks them?

Since I had just been given, of all things, a Pen of Light, which could write Illuminated

Words in the darkness, I wanted to do the best thing I could with it. So, I asked the

appropriate question—and, almost immediately, an answer revealed itself: *Write down the*

words you want inscribed on your soul. I wrote that down. That seemed pretty good—a little

on the romantic side, granted—but that was in keeping with the game. Then I upped the

ante. I decided to ask myself the hardest questions I could think up, and await their

answers. If you have a Pen of Light, after all, you should use it to answer Difficult

Questions. Here was the first: *What shall I do tomorrow?* The answer came: *The most good*

possible in the shortest period of time. That was satisfying, as well—conjoining an ambitious

aim with the demands of maximal efficiency. A worthy challenge. The second question

was in the same vein: *What shall I do next year? Try to ensure that the good I do then will be*

exceeded only by the good I do the year after that. That seemed solid, too—a nice extension of

the ambitions detailed in the previous answer. I told my friend that I was trying a serious

experiment in writing with the pen he had given to me. I asked if I could read aloud what

I had composed so far. The questions—and the answers—struck a chord with him, too.

That was good. That was impetus to continue.

The next question ended the first set: *What shall I do with my life? Aim for Paradise, and*

concentrate on today. Hah! I knew what that meant. It's what Geppetto does in the Disney

movie *Pinocchio,* when he wishes upon a star. The grandfatherly woodcarver lifts up his

eyes to the twinkling diamond set high above the mundane world of day-to-day human

concerns and articulates his deepest desire: that the marionette he created lose the strings

by which he is manipulated by others and transform himself into a real boy. It's also the

central message of the Sermon on the Mount, as we saw in Rule 4 (Compare yourself to

who you were yesterday …), but which deserve repeating here:

And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do

they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he

not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What

shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all

these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added

unto you (Matthew 6:28-6:33).

What does all that mean? Orient yourself properly. Then—and only then—concentrate on

the day. Set your sights at the Good, the Beautiful, and the True, and then focus pointedly

and carefully on the concerns of each moment. Aim continually at Heaven while you work

diligently on Earth. Attend fully to the future, in that manner, while attending fully to the

present. Then you have the best chance of perfecting both.

I turned, then, from the use of time to my relationships with people, and wrote down

and then read these questions and answers to my friend: *What shall I do with my wife? Treat*

her as if she is the Holy Mother of God, so that she may give birth to the world-redeeming hero.

What shall I do with my daughter? Stand behind her, listen to her, guard her, train her mind, and let

her know it's OK if she wants to be a mother. What shall I do with my parents? Act such that your

actions justify the suffering they endured. What shall I do with my son? Encourage him to be a true

Son of God.

To honour your wife as a Mother of God is to notice and support the sacred element of her

role as mother (not just of your children, but as such). A society that forgets this cannot

survive. Hitler's mother gave birth to Hitler, and Stalin's mother to Stalin. Was

something amiss in their crucial relationships? It seems likely, given the importance of

the maternal role in establishing trust217—to take a single vital example. Perhaps the

importance of their motherly duties, and of their relationship with their children, was not

properly stressed; perhaps what the women were doing in their maternal guise was not

properly regarded by husband, father and society alike. Who instead might a woman

produce if she was treated properly, honourably and carefully? After all, the fate of the

world rests on each new infant—tiny, fragile and threatened but, in time, capable of

uttering the words and doing the deeds that maintain the eternal, delicate balance

between chaos and order.

To stand behind my daughter? That's to encourage her, in everything she wants

courageously to do, but to include in that genuine appreciation for the fact of her

femininity: to recognize the importance of having a family and children and to forego the

temptation to denigrate or devalue that in comparison to accomplishment of personal

ambition or career. It's not for nothing that the Holy Mother and Infant is a divine image

—as we just discussed. Societies that cease to honour that image—that cease to see that

relationship as of transcendent and fundamental importance—also cease to be.

To act to justify the suffering of your parents is to remember all the sacrifices that all the

others who lived before you (not least your parents) have made for you in all the course

of the terrible past, to be grateful for all the progress that has been thereby made, and

then to act in accordance with that remembrance and gratitude. People sacrificed

immensely to bring about what we have now. In many cases, they literally died for it—and

we should act with some respect for that fact.

To encourage my son to be a true Son of God? That is to want him above all *to do what is*

right, and to strive to have his back while he is doing so. That is, I think, part of the

sacrificial message: to value and support your son's commitment to transcendent good

above all things (including his worldly progress, so to speak, and his safety —and,

perhaps, even his life).

I continued asking questions. The answers came within seconds. *What shall I do with the*

stranger? Invite him into my house, and treat him like a brother, so that he may become one. That's

to extend the hand of trust to someone so that his or her best part can step forward and

reciprocate. That's to manifest the sacred hospitality that makes life between those who

do not yet know each other possible. *What shall I do with a fallen soul? Offer a genuine and*

cautious hand, but do not join it in the mire. That's a good summary of what we covered in

Rule 3 (Make friends with people who want the best for you). That's an injunction to

refrain both from casting pearls before swine, and from camouflaging your vice with

virtue. *What shall I do with the world? Conduct myself as if Being is more valuable than Non-*

Being. Act so that you are not made bitter and corrupt by the tragedy of existence. That's

the essence of Rule 1 (Stand up straight with your shoulders back): confront the

uncertainty of the world voluntarily, and with faith and courage.

How shall I educate my people? Share with them those things I regard as truly important. That's

Rule 8 (Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie). That is to aim for wisdom, to distill that

wisdom into words, and to speak forth those words as if they matter, with true concern

and care. That's all relevant, as well, to the next question (and answer): *What shall I do*

with a torn nation? Stitch it back together with careful words of truth. The importance of this

injunction has, if anything, become clearer over the past few years: we are dividing, and

polarizing, and drifting toward chaos. It is necessary, under such conditions, if we are to

avoid catastrophe, for each of us to bring forward the truth, as we see it: not the

arguments that justify our ideologies, not the machinations that further our ambitions,

but the stark pure facts of our existence, revealed for others to see and contemplate, so

that we can find common ground and proceed together.

What shall I do for God my Father? Sacrifice everything I hold dear to yet greater perfection. Let

the deadwood burn off, so that new growth can prevail. That's the terrible lesson of Cain

and Abel, detailed in the discussion of meaning surrounding Rule 7. *What shall I do with a*

lying man? Let him speak so that he may reveal himself. Rule 9 (Listen …) is once again

relevant here, as is another section of the New Testament:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree

bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit,

neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and

cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Matthew 7:16-7:20).

The rot must be revealed before something sound can be put in its place, as was also

indicated in Rule 7's elaboration—and all of this is pertinent to understanding the

following question and answer: *How shall I deal with the enlightened one? Replace him with the*

true seeker of enlightenment. There is no enlightened one. There is only the one who is

seeking further enlightenment. Proper Being is process, not a state; a journey, not a

destination. It's the continual transformation of what you know, through encounter with

what you don't know, rather than the desperate clinging to the certainty that is eternally

insufficient in any case. That accounts for the importance of Rule 4 (Compare yourself

…). Always place your becoming above your current being. That means it is necessary to

recognize and accept your insufficiency, so that it can be continually rectified. That's

painful, certainly—but it's a good deal.

The next few Q & A's made another coherent group, focused this time on ingratitude:

What shall I do when I despise what I have? Remember those who have nothing and strive to be

grateful. Take stock of what is right in front of you. Consider Rule 12—somewhat tongue-

in-cheek—(Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street). Consider, as well, that you

may be blocked in your progress not because you lack opportunity, but because you have

been too arrogant to make full use of what already lies in front of you. That's Rule 6 (Set

your house in perfect order before you criticize the world).

I spoke recently with a young man about such things. He had barely ever left his family

and never his home state—but he journeyed to Toronto to attend one of my lectures and

to meet with me at my home. He had isolated himself far too severely in the short course

of his life to date and was badly plagued by anxiety. When we first met, he could hardly

speak. He had nonetheless determined in the last year to do something about all of that.

He started by taking on the lowly job of dishwasher. He decided to do it well, when he

could have treated it contemptuously. Intelligent enough to be embittered by a world that

did not recognize his gifts, he decided instead to accept with the genuine humility that is

the true precursor to wisdom whatever opportunity he could find. Now he lives on his

own. That's better than living at home. Now he has some money. Not much. But more

than none. And he earned it. Now he is confronting the social world, and benefitting from

the ensuing conflict:

Knowledge frequently results

from knowing others,

but the man who is awakened,

has seen the uncarved block.

Others might be mastered by force,

but to master one's self

requires the Tao.

He who has many material things,

may be described as rich,

but he who knows he has enough,

and is at one with the Tao,

might have enough of material things

and have self-being as well. 218

As long as my still-anxious but self-transforming and determined visitor continues down

his current path, he will become far more competent and accomplished, and it won't take

long. But this will only be because he accepted his lowly state and was sufficiently

grateful to take the first equally lowly step away from it. That's far preferable to waiting,

endlessly, for the magical arrival of Godot. That's far preferable to arrogant, static,

unchanging existence, while the demons of rage, resentment and unlived life gather

around.

What shall I do when greed consumes me? Remember that it is truly better to give than to receive.

The world is a forum of sharing and trading (that's Rule 7, again), not a treasure-house

for the plundering. To give is to do what you can to make things better. The good in

people will respond to that, and support it, and imitate it, and multiply it, and return it,

and foster it, so that everything improves and moves forward.

What shall I do when I ruin my rivers? Seek for the living water and let it cleanse the Earth. I

found this question, as well as its answer, particularly unexpected. It seems most

associated with Rule 6 (Set your house …). Perhaps our environmental problems are not

best construed technically. Maybe they're best considered psychologically. The more

people sort themselves out, the more responsibility they will take for the world around

them and the more problems they will solve. 219 It is better, proverbially, to rule your own

spirit than to rule a city. It's easier to subdue an enemy without than one within. Maybe

241

the environmental problem is ultimately spiritual. If we put ourselves in order, perhaps

we will do the same for the world. Of course, what else would a psychologist think?

The next set were associated with proper response to crisis and exhaustion:

What shall I do when my enemy succeeds? Aim a little higher and be grateful for the lesson. Back

to Matthew: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and

hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do

good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute

you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven" (5:43-5:45). What

does this mean? Learn, from the success of your enemies; listen (Rule 9) to their critique,

so that you can glean from their opposition whatever fragments of wisdom you might

incorporate, to your betterment; adopt as your ambition the creation of a world in which

those who work against you see the light and wake up and succeed, so that the better at

which you are aiming can encompass them, too.

What shall I do when I'm tired and impatient? Gratefully accept an outstretched helping hand.

This is something with a twofold meaning. It's an injunction, first, to note the reality of

the limitations of individual being and, second, to accept and be thankful for the support

of others—family, friends, acquaintances and strangers alike. Exhaustion and impatience

are inevitable. There is too much to be done and too little time in which to do it. But we

don't have to strive alone, and there is nothing but good in distributing the

responsibilities, cooperating in the efforts, and sharing credit for the productive and

meaningful work thereby undertaken.

What shall I do with the fact of aging? Replace the potential of my youth with the

accomplishments of my maturity. This hearkens back to the discussion of friendship

surrounding Rule 3, and the story of Socrates' trial and death—which might be

summarized, as follows: *A life lived thoroughly justifies its own limitations*. The young man

with nothing has his possibilities to set against the accomplishments of his elders. It's not

clear that it's necessarily a bad deal, for either. "An aged man is but a paltry thing," wrote

William Butler Yeats, "A tattered coat upon a stick, unless/Soul clap its hands and sing,

and louder sing/For every tatter in its mortal dress …."220

What shall I do with my infant's death? Hold my other loved ones and heal their pain. It is

necessary to be strong in the face of death, because death is intrinsic to life. It is for this

reason that I tell my students: aim to be the person at your father's funeral that everyone,

in their grief and misery, can rely on. There's a worthy and noble ambition: strength in

the face of adversity. That is very different from the wish for a life free of trouble.

What shall I do in the next dire moment? Focus my attention on the next right move. The flood

is coming. The flood is always coming. The apocalypse is always upon us. That's why the

story of Noah is archetypal. Things fall apart—we stressed that in the discussion

surrounding Rule 10 (Be precise in your speech)—and the centre cannot hold. When

everything has become chaotic and uncertain, all that remains to guide you might be the

character you constructed, previously, by aiming up and concentrating on the moment at

hand. If you have failed in that, you will fail in the moment of crisis, and then God help

you.

That last set contained what I thought were the most difficult of all the questions I

asked that night. The death of a child is, perhaps, the worst of catastrophes. Many

relationships fail in the aftermath of such a tragedy. But dissolution in the face of such

horror is not inevitable, although it is understandable. I have seen people immensely

strengthen their remaining family bonds when someone close to them has died. I have

seen them turn to those who remained and redouble their efforts to connect with them

and support them. Because of that, all regained at least some of what had been so terribly

torn away by death. We must therefore commiserate in our grief. We must come together

in the face of the tragedy of existence. Our families can be the living room with the

fireplace that is cozy and welcoming and warm while the storms of winter rage outside.

The heightened knowledge of fragility and mortality produced by death can terrify,

embitter and separate. It can also awaken. It can remind those who grieve not to take the

people who love them for granted. Once I did some chilling calculations regarding my

parents, who are in their eighties. It was an example of the hated arithmetic we

encountered in the discussion of Rule 5 (Do not let your children do anything that makes

you dislike them)—and I walked through the equations so that I would stay properly

conscious. I see my Mom and Dad about twice a year. We generally spend several weeks

together. We talk on the phone in the interim between visits. But the life expectancy of

people in their eighties is under ten years. That means I am likely to see my parents, if I

am fortunate, fewer than twenty more times. That's a terrible thing to know. But knowing

it puts a stop to my taking those opportunities for granted.

The next set of questions—and answers—had to do with the development of character.

What shall I say to a faithless brother? The King of the Damned is a poor judge of Being. It is my

firm belief that the best way to fix the world—a handyman's dream, if ever there was one

—is to fix yourself, as we discussed in Rule 6. Anything else is presumptuous. Anything

else risks harm, stemming from your ignorance and lack of skill. But that's OK. There's

plenty to do, right where you are. After all, your specific personal faults detrimentally

affect the world. Your conscious, voluntary sins (because no other word really works)

makes things worse than they have to be. Your inaction, inertia and cynicism removes

from the world that part of you that could learn to quell suffering and make peace. That's

not good. There are endless reasons to despair of the world, and to become angry and

resentful and to seek revenge.

Failure to make the proper sacrifices, failure to reveal yourself, failure to live and tell

the truth—all that weakens you. In that weakened state, you will be unable to thrive in

the world, and you will be of no benefit to yourself or to others. You will fail and suffer,

stupidly. That will corrupt your soul. How could it be otherwise? Life is hard enough

when it is going well. But when it's going badly? And I have learned through painful

experience that nothing is going so badly that it can't be made worse. This is why Hell is

a bottomless pit. This is why Hell is associated with that aforementioned sin. In the most

awful of cases, the terrible suffering of unfortunate souls becomes attributable, by their

own judgment, to mistakes they made knowingly in the past: acts of betrayal, deception,

cruelty, carelessness, cowardice and, most commonly of all, willful blindness. To suffer

terribly and to know yourself as the cause: that is Hell. And once in Hell it is very easy to

curse Being itself. And no wonder. But it's not justifiable . *And that's why the King of the*

Damned is a poor judge of Being.

How do you build yourself into someone on whom you can rely, in the best of times

and the worst—in peace and in war? How do you build for yourself the kind of character

that will not ally itself, in its suffering and misery, with all who dwell in Hell? The

questions and answers continued, all pertinent, in one way or another, to the rules I have

outlined in this book:

What shall I do to strengthen my spirit? Do not tell lies, or do what you despise.

What shall I do to ennoble my body? Use it only in the service of my soul.

What shall I do with the most difficult of questions? Consider them the gateway to the path of life.

What shall I do with the poor man's plight? Strive through right example to lift his broken heart.

What shall I do when the great crowd beckons? Stand tall and utter my broken truths.

And that was that. I still have my Pen of Light. I haven't written anything with it since.

Maybe I will again when the mood strikes and something wells up from deep below. But,

even if I don't, it helped me find the words to properly close this book.

I hope that my writing has proved useful to you. I hope it revealed things you knew that

I hope that my writing has proved useful to you. I hope it revealed things you knew that

you did not know you knew. I hope the ancient wisdom I discussed provides you with

strength. I hope it brightened the spark within you. I hope you can straighten up, sort out

your family, and bring peace and prosperity to your community. I hope, in accordance

with Rule 11 (Do not bother children when they are skateboarding), that you strengthen

and encourage those who are committed to your care instead of protecting them to the

point of weakness.

I wish you all the best, and hope that you can wish the best for others.

What will you write with your pen of light?

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through every human heart—and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside

us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one

small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains

… an unuprooted small corner of evil. Since then I have come to understand the

truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the evil inside a human

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the

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Connotations:

error

of

judgment;

fatal

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A

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is

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There

are

very

useful

commentaries

on

every

Biblical

verse

at

http://biblehub.com/commentaries/

and

specifically

on

this

verse

at

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have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will

have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but

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258

259

THE BEGINNING

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260

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261

FOREWORD

fn1 Some argue—mistakenly—that Freud (often mentioned in these pages) contributed to our current

longing for a culture, schools and institutions that are "non-judgmental." It is true that he recommended

that when psychoanalysts listen to their patients in therapy, they be tolerant, empathic, and not voice

critical, moralistic judgments. But this was for the express purposes of helping patients feel comfortable in

being totally honest, and not diminish their problems. This encouraged self-reflection, and allowed them

to explore warded off feelings, wishes, even shameful anti-social urges. It also—and this was the

masterstroke—allowed them to discover their own unconscious conscience (and its judgments), and their

own harsh self-criticism of their "lapses," and their own unconscious guilt which they had often hidden

from themselves, but which often formed the basis of their low self-esteem, depression and anxiety. If

anything, Freud showed that we are both more immoral and more moral than we are aware of. This kind

of "non-judgmentalism," *in therapy*, is a powerful and liberating technique or tactic—an ideal attitude

when you want to better understand yourself. But Freud never argued (as do some who want all culture to

become one huge group therapy session) that one can live one's *entire life* without *ever* making judgments,

or without morality. In fact, his point in *Civilization and its Discontents* is that civilization only arises when

some restraining rules and morality are in place.

OVERTURE

fn1 The yin/yang symbol is the second part of the more comprehensive five-part *tajitu*, a diagram representing both the original absolute unity and its division into the multiplicity of the observed world.

This is discussed in more detail in Rule 2, below, as well as elsewhere in the book.

fn2 I use the term Being (with a capital "B") in part because of my exposure to the ideas of the 20th-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger tried to distinguish between reality, as

conceived objectively, and the totality of human experience (which is his "Being"). Being (with a capital

"B") is what each of us experiences, subjectively, personally and individually, as well as what we each

experience jointly with others. As such, it includes emotions, drives, dreams, visions and revelations, as

well as our private thoughts and perceptions. Being is also, finally, something that is brought into

existence by action, so its nature is to an indeterminate degree a consequence of our decisions and choices

—something shaped by our hypothetically free will. Construed in this manner, Being is (1) not something

easily and directly reducible to the material and objective and (2) something that most definitely requires

its own term, as Heidegger labored for decades to indicate.

RULE 2: TREAT YOURSELF LIKE SOMEONE YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR HELPING

fn1 It is of great interest, in this regard, that the five-part *taijitu* (referred to in Chapter 1 and the source of the simpler yin/yang symbol) expresses the origin of the cosmos as, first, originating in the

undifferentiated absolute, then dividing into yin and yang (chaos/order, feminine/masculine), and then

into the five agents (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) and then, simply put, "the ten thousand things." The

Star of David (chaos/order, feminine/masculine) gives rise in the same way to the four basic elements:

fire, air, water and earth (out of which everything else is built). A similar hexagram is used by the Hindus.

The downward triangle symbolizes Shakti, the feminine; the upward triangle, Shiva, the masculine. The

two components are known as *om* and *hrim* in Sanskrit. Remarkable examples of conceptual parallelism.

fn2 Or, in another interpretation, He split the original androgynous individual into two parts, male and female. According to this line of thinking, Christ, the "second Adam," is also the original Man, before the

sexual subdivision. The symbolic meaning of this should be clear to those who have followed the

argument thus far.

RULE 5: DO NOT LET YOUR CHILDREN DO ANYTHING THAT MAKES YOU DISLIKE THEM

fn1 I draw here and will many times again in the course of this book on my clinical experience (as I have, already, on my personal history). I have tried to keep the moral of the stories intact, while disguising

the details for the sake of the privacy of those involved. I hope I got the balance right.

262

RULE 7: PURSUE WHAT IS MEANINGFUL (NOT WHAT IS EXPEDIENT)

fn1 And this is all true, note, whether there is—or is not— *actually* such a powerful figure, "in the sky" :)

fn2 In keeping with this observation is the fact that the word Set is an etymological precursor to the word Satan. See Murdock, D.M. (2009). *Christ in Egypt: the Horus-Jesus connection*. Seattle, WA: Stellar

House, p. 75.

fn3 For anyone who thinks this is somehow unrealistic, given the concrete material reality and genuine suffering that is associated with privation, I would once again recommend Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag*

Archipelago, which contains a series of exceptionally profound discussions about proper ethical behavior

and its exaggerated rather than diminished importance in situations of extreme want and suffering.

RULE 9: ASSUME THAT THE PERSON YOU ARE LISTENING TO MIGHT KNOW SOMETHING YOU DON'T

fn1 Here, again, I have disguised many of the details of this case, to maintain the privacy of those involved, while attempting to maintain the central meaning of the events.

fn2 The strategy of speaking to individuals is not only vital to the delivery of any message, it's a useful antidote to fear of public speaking. No one wants to be stared at by hundreds of unfriendly, judgmental

eyes. However, almost everybody can talk to just one attentive person. So, if you have to deliver a speech

(another terrible phrase) then do that. Talk to the individuals in the audience —and don't hide: not behind

the podium, not with downcast eyes, not by speaking too quietly or mumbling, not by apologizing for your

lack of brilliance or preparedness, not behind ideas that are not yours, and not behind clichés.

RULE 10: BE PRECISE IN YOUR SPEECH

fn1 This is why, for example, it has taken us far longer than we originally assumed to make robots that could function autonomously in the world. The problem of perception is far more difficult than our

immediate effortless access to our own perceptions predisposes us to infer. In fact, the problem of

perception is so difficult that it stalled the early progress of artificial intelligence almost fatally (from the

perspective of that time), as we discovered that disembodied abstract reason could not solve even simple

real-world problems. Pioneers such as Rodney Brooks proposed in the late 1980s and early '90s that

bodies in action were necessary preconditions to the parsing of the world into manageable things, and the

AI revolution regained its confidence and momentum.

fn2 The recording is available at Peterson, J.B. (2002). Slaying the Dragon Within Us. Lecture, originally broadcast by TVO: available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REjUkEj1O_0

RULE 11: DO NOT BOTHER CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE SKATEBOARDING

fn1 Names and other details have been changed for the sake of privacy.

fn2 37-28/28 = 9/28 = 32 percent.

fn3 35-29/35 = 6/35 = 17 percent.

Document Outline

- Title Page
- Foreword
- Overture
- RULE 1: Stand up straight with your shoulders back
- RULE 2: Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping
- RULE 3: Make friends with people who want the best for you
- RULE 4: Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today
- RULE 5: Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them
- RULE 6: Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world
- RULE 7: Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)
- RULE 8: Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie
- RULE 9: Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't
- RULE 10: Be precise in your speech
- RULE 11: Do not bother children when they are skateboarding
- RULE 12: Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street
- Coda
- Endnotes
- Acknowledgements
- Follow Penguin
- Copyright Page